

Infernal Responsibility

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Summary: Being the son of the chief takes brains, courage, and a lot of patience. But at his father's the request for marriage, Hiccup decides he has had enough. When he seeks out a life of ease, he runs into more than what he bargained for.

1. Assignment

Small, worthless, insignificant. That was the description of young Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III. At least, that was before the incident of the Red Death. After that, he became the dragon expert of the island of Berk. Still, he stayed a scrawny, tiny, squirt-faced, dare we say, dork. Sure, he was respected, but that didn't mean the teasing stopped. It really was a shame that he was an easy target. After all, he was much too kind for his own good.

The wind was cool, winter in air. Light eyelashes brushed against a cheek. Auburn hair swirled and fell, dusting pale freckled skin. A trilling sound came from the boy's seat.

Hiccup found himself waiting. Waiting for everyone to catch up to him and Toothless. They stood at the top of the cliff, the kids still dots in the distance.

"Good job bud." Hiccup pet the side of his mane.

Astrid was next to land. She was in good nature, knowing that Toothless was unfathomably fast. "Wow, Hiccup! You guys totally smoked us!"

"Well, Snotlout wanted a race, and he told me to make it fair!" He said honestly.

"Too bad he's such a sore loser!" She smiled.

The twins managed to widdle into third, followed by Snotlout, and then Fishlegs; who knew that he would lose anyway.

"Snotlout, looks like Hookfang's slowing down." Astrid joked.

"Nuh uh!" The stocky kid argued. "Ruff and Tuff totally cheated!"

"As if!" Ruffnut scoffed.

"You think we're really smart enough to come up with a plan like that?" Tuffnut added. "Wait..."

"The point is, if this were on the ground, we all know who would win." Snotlout pushed.

"Yeah," Said Hiccup, "Astrid."

"Noooo, me!"

"Is that a challenge?" The blonde snarked.

"First one into town wins."

"Is that it?"

"Loser has to brush the winner's dragon's teeth. With their own toothbrush."

"Oh, it's on." Astrid narrowed her eyes.

"Um, guys. Two things." Fishlegs interrupted. "One, we all know I would lose anyways, so can I be ref?"

No one argued.

"Two, everyone should have a handicap, since Hiccup has a disadvantage."

"So?" Shrugged Snotlout. "We never had handicaps during dragon races, and everyone knows it's not even."

"What's wrong Snotlout? Afraid he'll beat you?" Astrid defended.

"What do you suppose we do for a Handicap then? Hmm?"

Everyone looked to Hiccup. "Well...If you want to be fair, I say we cut your legs off and feed them to the dragons."

There was a long silence as his joke fell flat.

"Well, we should be fair, so Snotlout and Tuffnut should get heavier weights, while Ruffnut and Astrid have less heavy weights."

The girls didn't argue, knowing that it would be to their advantage.

"Use your weapons." Fishlegs suggested. "Snotlout and Tuffnut carry shields. Astrid carries her axe, and Ruffnut carries her sword and

helmet. Sound good?"

Everyone nodded in agreement.

"Here's the starting line." Hiccup drew a line with his prosthetic. "Fishlegs, draw a line at the village when you get back, okay?"

"Runners, get ready!" Fishlegs said mounting his gronkle.

Everyone poised at the starting line.

"Get set!"

They raised their backs, ready to launch.

"GO!"

The teens were off in a flash, well, most of them. Despite the mutual handicap, Hiccup fell behind quickly. He pushed hard, trying to use the spring-like release in his leg to his advantage, but it wasn't working.

Fishlegs and Meatlug passed by not too long after. "Keep it up Hiccup!" He called in encouragement.

Hiccup put on a burst of speed and hurried on. The boy hated running, the pressure of his weight on his tiny limbs just made him sore. He always felt like gravity favored him and forbade him to go as fast as his aerodynamic body could go. Then of course, he only ever ran for his life, whether it was from dragons or from Snotlout. Even then, if it was not for clever thinking and handy hiding places, he would had been, dare we say, pulverized, in so many senses of the word.

Wind filled his lungs as he pushed harder and harder. The faster he went, the more intense he felt the weight in his leg, the absolute defeat of disability. His chest ached, his nose burned, and all this because of his cousin's stupid ego. He should have opted out like Fishlegs. He saw the teens ahead of him, and Fishlegs sitting at the finish line. He dared not watch, but stared at the ground as he took the final stretch.

Suddenly, he felt his prosthetic begin to unravel. "No! No! I thought I had it stable this time!" He started to hop on one leg as his metal leg fell off completely.

He took the finish line last, swinging his arms to compensate. As he ended, he fell firmly on his butt.

"Haha! Look who's the loser now?!" Snotlout laughed, puffing out his chest.

Astrid knelt and held his prosthetic while he tied it back on his leg. "Only because his leg fell off. If this had been a fair race, he could have won..." She tried to reason.

"Forget it Astrid," Snotlout chuckled. "We all know that when it comes to being on land, I'm faster, stronger, and all over superior! Stumpy is only good in the air because he has a Nightfury."

"Snotlout..." Astrid hissed. "Why don't you quit picking on Hiccup for your own incompetence?"

"Aw, the little Freyja is protecting her OÃ°r." Tuffnut snickered.

Astrid backed away from Hiccup in embarrassment. "Yeah, right." She pathetically kicked Hiccup in the side.

"No, Snotlout's right, for once." Hiccup said as he stood, ignoring Tuffnut's taunting. "I've always been slow. I'm just fortunate that I have Toothless to help me out."

"What about Fishlegs?" Ruffnut asked.

The teens looked over to the enlarged boy to see a love fest happening with the gronckle.

"I don't think he cares." Tuffnut shrugged.

Hiccup smiled slightly. "He's got brain and brawn, he doesn't need speed."

"But at least he can defend himself. Unlike some scrawny fishbone."

Hiccup sighed, but said nothing to counter.

"Hey, I'm getting hungry. Can we call it a day, Hiccup?" Tuffnut asked.

"Sure. Everyone's dismissed."

With that, the teens went their own way, Astrid walking with Hiccup. "Wow, Snotlout sure was relentless today. Huh?"

"Hmmmâ€|" Hiccup hummed in agreement.

"Why didn't you fight back?"

"With what? He knows how to train dragons too. And all my other skills are useless in viking society. You know that."

"Well, yeah, sure, everyone knows that. But you could deliver some clever quips."

"Nah, Snotlout always has to have the last word. I don't care."

"I think you do." Astrid said gripping his shoulder. "It doesn't make you any more of a viking to let him step all over you."

"Gee, thank you for reminding me." They had arrived at Hiccup's home, and Toothless sat outside where he had been waiting since before the race. "I don't need Snotlout's approval to be a part of this tribe. So what if I'm not a viking? I have Toothless and you, and my father's finally proud of me. I couldn't ask for more."

"Well, don't let him get to you anyway." She punched his arm.

"I'll try." He rolled his eyes as he rubbed his arm.

Astrid's gaze went to something on the hill, behind his house.
"What's that?"

"Hmm?" He turned to see the beginnings of a house being formed. "Huh, someone must have gotten engaged. I'll have to ask my dad about it."

"See you tomorrow, then!"

"See you!"

Hiccup watch Astrid as she turned and walked away, with a smile on his face. He couldn't be thankful enough for such an awesome friend. After she turned the corner, he opened the door to his house, where Stoick sat by the fire.

"Hiccup." He said in a very deep, demanding voice. "Leave Toothless outside, we need to talk."

Hiccup patted his dragon on the nose, hauled the basket of fish out for his dinner, and closed the door. "Yeah dad?" He questioned. Then he noticed that dinner had already been made, even though it was his job. "Oh, I was late. I'm sorry—we were on our way back, and Snotlout wanted a race—"

"No, there's something else. Take a seat." Stoick's demeanor scared the boy, the only other time he had seen him like this was back when he was still called 'useless'. "A messenger came for me today, from Outcast island."

"What do they want?" He asked as he dished up a chicken leg.

Stoick was silent a long time before boring his green eyes into his son's. "Your head."

"It's not surprising, Alvin's been wanting me since he found out about the dragons."

"This is different, Hiccup. He said he is willing to sign a peace treaty and create an alliance if we surrender you."

Hiccup looked in shock. His hand lowered as he suddenly lost his appetite. The safety of the entire tribe, suspending on the fragile threads of his existence?

Talk about humbling. The answer was obvious. "Well, dad, I would be honored to sacrifice myself for the safety of the tribe. You know that."

Stoick smiled in pride. "Once again Hiccup, you've got the wrong idea. I'm not going to sacrifice my only son and heir. I know I must look out for my people, but I can see what Alvin is doing. If I give you over to them, I will have no heir. And the Hooligan tribe will fall without a chief, and then the Outcast tribe can attempt to come in and claim it. No, I'm not falling for their tricks."

"Then, what is it?"

Stoick stood, pacing the room with his hands behind his back. "Within two fortnights, you will be turning sixteen years of age. I hate to admit this, but, I'm getting old, Hiccup. I need to make sure the chieftdom is secure if something were to happen to me."

"Don't worry dad, I'm fully prepared to take over, and Gobber can help me as well."

"It's not you I'm worried about, it's your son."

The boy did a spit take on his water. "Myâ€|_what?_ Dad, do you know something that I don't? Because I'm pretty sure I haven't impregnated anyone."

"No, Hiccup. What I'm saying is, I need to see you married and produce a child. Say, now."

"Whoa whoa whoa, you want me to get married?! Hello! This is Hiccup you're talking about! Most of the girls on this island are bigger than me! How do you expect me to get married!?"

"That's what I'm trying to say. Most boys get married around this age, but as chief, you need to get married on the eve of your sixteenth birthday. I'm giving you 14 days to find a girl and propose. If you can't then I'll arrange a marriage."

Hiccup was spiraling, walking rapidly back and forth across the room. "And who am I supposed to ask?! I don't know any girl who would willingly marry me!"

"Why not ask Astrid?" Stoick suggested.

Hiccup's face burned. "As-Astrid?! THEE Astrid!? I mean, sure I'm fond of her! And she may have kissed me, onceâ€|or twiceâ€|" He shook his head. "The point is, she would never accept! She's far too independent! And I bet she'd like a nice strong type to ask!"

"You never know until you try." Stoick smirked.

Hiccup sighed. "Please don't make me do this dad. Can't you give me a few years?"

"No, everything is already prepared. Your cabin is also being built, farther up the hill."

"My house? That's mine?! Oh geez..."

"Feel free to make adjustments as you need."

"But dad, there's nothing to be afraid of! We have dragons as defense from other tribes, you're not in any danger, and neither am I! Can't it wait?"

"I said no Hiccup!" Stoick shouted, pounding his fist on the table. "Why can't you just be the son I want you to be?!"

His _son_ grabbed the wooden plate from the table, a hurt look on his face. "Fine. I see. Whatever you wantâ€|father." Then he stormed out of the cabin.

Outside, Toothless saw the angered look spread over his rider's face and followed him curiously. Hiccup went into the back of the forge, his workroom, his safe haven. He slammed the plate down on the counter and savagely devoured the chicken leg.

"Hiccup the Horrendous," he spoke to himself with a full mouth. "The unwanted son."

Gobber peeked his head in. "Ah! There ya are, lad! I though' I'd heard ya mumblin' to yerself. Somedin wrong?"

"No." Hiccup lied, his cheeks still full of meat.

Gobber didn't press it. "Alright. Mind givin' me a hand den? I promised Bucket I'd fix his axe, but I haven't finished me other projects."

Hiccup swallowed thickly, not minding the thought of pounding out some metal. "Sure, Gobber." He came into the main part of the forge, where the glory hole and grindstone sat. Toothless rested his head on the windowsill, lazy eyes observing the work.

"'Er ya go lad." Gobber dropped the heavy and twisted axe into the boys hands.

Hiccup swayed with it for a moment. "What in Odin's name did he do to it?!" He gawked, staring at the bent blade.

"Who knows? It's Bucket after all."

Hiccup shrugged, but removed the blade and placed it in the fires, heating the iron. He worked impatiently and fast, causing the iron to not heat up to a point of malleability. Instead, Hiccup mostly just pounded the Hel out of it, bending it worse.

"Stupid chief. Stupid laws. Stupid traditions. Stupid marriage. You kill a dragon, loose a leg, and for what? A crummy nickname and a dad who nags you about everything." He mumbled to himself as he worked.

Gobber watched in concern. "You know what's going on?" He asked Toothless.

The dragon released a guttural sigh, sensing his friends duress, but not knowing what caused it.

Finally, the poor beat up blade had enough, and sought out vengeance. A large scalding shard exploded from the main body and sliced across Hiccup's wrist.

He dropped his tools and clutched the wound. "IF THOR WAS A WIZARD, HIS SON WOULD BE A PIG!" He shouted.

Fishlegs, who happened to walk past as Hiccup spewed the profanity, poked his head into the forge.

"Hey Gobber." He said casually. "Is Hiccup okay?"

"Something's on his mind." The blacksmith knew. He took Hiccup's injured hand away from him and placed it in a bucket of frigid water.

Instant visible relief showed. "Alright lad, what's troublin' ye?"

"Is this about the race?" Asked Fishlegs, "Because I'm sure you were going easy on the handicap, and Astrid won, so Snotlout shouldn't have been such a prick. And I don't think that Astrid will make you clean Stormfly's teethâ€|"

"No, no no." Hiccup sighed and began to wrap his wound. "It's my dad, and his stupid needs." He sighed. "Wait, Astrid won?"

"Yeah, and did you even see her mention it? No, because Snotlout denied it. Anyway, what about your dad?"

"Want to tell?" Gobber persisted.

Hiccup looked between his three friends in the forge, and then gave a long exasperation. He started from the beginning, and told all the details. Fishlegs and Gobber seemed a bit embarrassed, but sympathetic at the same time. After all the years they had known him, this seemed very uncharacteristic to the boy. Hiccup spoke rapidly, shakily. Absent was his dry humor and poor attempts at jokes, but the worry and fear was prevalent. Hiccup went to stand by his faithful companion as his tale came to a close.

"Well," asked Gobber. "I seem to think it's funny that you would rather sacrifice yourself to the Outcasts then get married."

"They'd kill me. I just know it." Hiccup confessed. "That doesn't scare me. What scares me is being a screw up to my family. Being a useless husband, and a cruddy dad. Just like I'm a bad son."

Gobber sighed. "You're not a bad son Hiccup, you're justâ€|different."

"Yes, yes, but we all know how vikings take things that are different. Now can we get back to the problem at hand?"

"Who does he think you'll propose to?" Asked Fishlegs.

"He suggestedâ€|stridâ€|." He muttered.

"Who?"

"Astrid! He told me to ask Astrid!"

The three smiled. "Well, why not? She's your closest friend, besides Toothless."

The dragon purred as the topic of the blonde came up.

"Iâ€|I don't knowâ€|I mean, she is my closest friend, but that's just it! What if she says no? We're close, but not THAT close! I can't ruin our relationship! She's so wonderful." He stated unabashed.

The two humans looked at each other, thinking. "Yer dad said he'd arrange a marriage at the end of the month?" Gobber asked. "Don'tcha think gettin' married ta anyone would put a damper on yer relationship wid Astrid?"

Hiccup shrugged, scratching Toothless's snout.

"I betcha, if anything, Stoick would make an arrangement with Darla of the Gaul tribe."

Hiccup snapped his head over to stare at him in sheer horror. "Darla the Disagreeable!? That Darla!? Oh, no that's out. That's way, way out! I'd marry Ruffnut before her! Heck, I'd marry Snotlout and have a child! Don't ask how, but I would!"

"Oh she can't be that badâ€¦right?" Fishlegs innocently asked.

Memories of two young vikings came to Hiccup's mind as he distinctly remembered her looking at him with her crossed eyes, her jagged teeth, and unbrow. Then there was the time she pinned him to the ground and tried to kiss him, despite her strange lip fungusâ€¦then there was that pustule infection on her neckâ€¦Hiccup shook himself out of the vision. "No. There is no way I will even come into contact with her."

"Then, you'll have to ask Astrid." Gobber shrugged.

"How? I don't know the first thing about romance! Unless you include embarrassing yourself and stuttering like a moron, then I'm an expert."

"You already have a foot in the door. She likes you, why else would she defend you and punch you in admiration?" Fishlegs pointed out.

"You have to show her that you care."

"But don't over do it."

"Compliment her."

"But be honest."

"Woo her."

"But be humble."

Hiccup attempted to understand the crossfire of advice he was getting. "Wait, since when are you two the experts on romance?"

They both shrugged. "Do you want help or not?"

"Fine, I'll take your advice. But if this explodes in my face, I'm blaming it on you two."

"Fair enough lad." Gobber took away the mangled axe. "I'll work on this, you have something more important to work on."

Hiccup sighed. "Right, the oath band. I've never made jewelry before thoughâ€¦"

"I'll help ya lad, don't you worry. But I think Astrid would appreciate it more if you made it yourself."

"Agreed." He then turned to Fishlegs. "Would you be willing to help?"

The larger boy shrugged. "What do you need?"

"I need you to get Meatlug to eat a chunk of gold, and then a piece of copper of approximately a quarter of the size. Think you could do that?"

"How big does this gold rock need to be?"

"Just a few ounces, enough to work with in case I make a mistake."

"I can do that." The boy smiled. "Anything to help out a friend."

"Thanks Fishlegs, you're the best."

Gobber acknowledged his plan. "Goin' with a rose gold I see. Hard to work with, you know."

"I know, but this needs to be perfect."

"What are you going to do for the design? Just a simple band?"

"No, the ring needs to be complex, like Astrid. Pure in elements, and strong in make up. Above all, it must be elegant and beautiful."

"Astrid, elegant? I think you're seeing something we don't."

Hiccup ignored that comment. "I'm thinking a cloisonné ring."

Gobber let out a pathetic chuckle. "Cloisonné? Are you sure you're ready for that, lad? I mean, you've only done it once or twice when decorating sword and axe handles."

"I'm sure."

"What are you going to use for colored stones?"

"I'll use a few scales from Stormfly. They're beautiful, and it will be that more special to Astrid."

"Okay lad, why don't you start on drawing the design tonight, and tomorrow, I'll help you make it."

"Alright Gobber."

2. Proposal

Despite Gobber's plan to help Hiccup in the morning, the teen decided he didn't want to wait. The assignment by his father weighed heavily in his mind, giving him anxiety. He went back home that night, but constantly tossed and turned in fitful sleep. He gave up and came back to the forge and had been working ever since.

Gobber entered the shack to see Hiccup asleep at his bench, his prize sitting on the table.

"Hiccup!" He grasped his shoulder and startled him.

"Uh wha?" Hiccup sat up quickly in shock.

"Have you been here all night, lad?"

The teen swallowed and blinked his bleary eyes. "Yes, who's asking?" He shook his head.

"I was going to offer to help you, but it looks like you took care of everything by yourself."

He yawned, realizing it was just Gobber. "I couldn't sleep. Too worried."

"I see. Where did you get the material? I thought Fishlegs was going to help ye."

"I smuggled Meatlug out, and we went stone hunting by torchlight. Once I found what I was looking for, which was not easy, I brought her back here so she could throw it up, then I took her back without Fishlegs even knowing."

Gobber inspected the piece. "It's good work, very good. Couldn't have done it better myself." He praised.

"Well, I did come up with Toothless's harness and tail all by myself, I can't be that incompetent."

"No laddie, in just a few short years, you've managed to reach my level...just not my strength." He laughed.

Hiccup yawned again. "I can compensate for it."

"That you can." Gobber again looked at the faint salmon metal with iridescent design engraved into it. "And you took these scales from Stormfly?"

"Yep," he laid his head back on the table. "Different spots. Keep in mind, it is very tricky to sneak up on a Deadly Nadder with a squeaky leg."

Gobber chuckled. "Sounds like you had a rough night, aye?"

Hiccup's eyes closed. "I still have to grind it, and then put the glass seal around it..." He yawned. "But that can wait for later. I still have a few days."

There was a knock on the frame of the forge. "Hiccup?" It was Astrid.

"Hmm?" He sat up, his eyes still closed, and covered the ring.

"I thought I might find you here, it's time for breakfast."

"Yeah, uh-huh, okay." He replied, coming to stand.

Gobber came over and whispered to Astrid. "The boy's been up all night. He's a bit out of it." He warned.

She nodded in understanding. "Come on, Hiccup. We're having eggs and mutton."

"Mmm, mutton." He replied, following her out like a zombie.

Gobber took the moment to carefully wrap up the gift and place it in the back for later.

When it came time for dragon training, Hiccup was strangely absent, giving charge of the class to Astrid.

"Where's Hiccup?" Tuff asked.

"Probably crying from his horrible loss from yesterday." Snotlout laughed.

Astrid huffed. "No, he's sleeping. He stayed up all night, something about a project for his dad."

Fishlegs flinched, but it went unnoticed.

"I say since the Hiccup ain't here, we cancel class."

"We aren't canceling training." Astrid argued.

"What did he say he was making?" Ruff asked.

"Probably to make a better leg so he's not so slow."

"Would you stop with the leg thing?!" Astrid exasperated. "I don't know what he was working on, but he said it was secret, and I would know eventually."

"I wonder what it could be...a giant self propelled axe?" Ruffnut wondered aloud.

"Maybe it's a giant flammable arrow!"

"Or maybe it's a super fancy new weapon that Stoick thought of."

There was a long pause as Astrid rolled her eyes and looked to a nervous Fishlegs. "What do you think it is, Fishlegs?"

The boy tensed and froze. He never worked under pressure, and he could feel his hair stand up as he started to sweat. "I don't know..." He attempted.

Tuffnut huffed. "C'mon, you must have some wild guess at what it could be."

"Uh..." He stalled. "Coming mom!" And he hurriedly mounted his Gronkle and flew off.

While all of this was taking place, Hiccup was not in fact sleeping, but finishing his ring, along with some other projects.

"Finished the last sword ya wanted." Gobber said as he placed the weapon on the table.

"Thanks Gobber." The teen mumbled as he worked on a shield.

"Hiccup, you've been working all day, and ya haven't slept a wink. Why don't you take a break?"

"No." He argued. "I'm almost done."

Gobber sighed as he wiped his good hand on a towel. "Well then, what do you need me to do?"

It was well after dinner when he finished. Hiccup dragged himself home, bleary-eyed and woozy. Toothless greeted him at the door, bounding around in excitement, hoping for a sunset ride.

"No, sorry bud." The teen scratched his nose. "Not tonight."

"So..." Stoick asked. "How did it go with Astrid?"

"How did what go?" Hiccup replied.

"The proposal?" He questioned, like he could possibly mean anything else.

A loud grunt came from Hiccup. "Uuhhh, right. I haven't asked her yet. I was making..." He yawned, "...offerings."

"Ah! Right! Of course! Very important! Well, you still have plenty of time, and you seem to know what you're doing, so, why don't you get some rest?"

The sound of sleep was calling to him. He groped for the wall in an effort to find his way up the stairs. Toothless sensed his helplessness and went to his aid. Soon enough, Hiccup was tucked snugly into bed and he had his good night's rest, not having a single thought in his head.

The next morning proved to be entirely different, however. As soon as he awoke, Stoick was on him like a fly to feces.

"So, oh great blacksmith, what did you spend the day making?
Hmm?"

Hiccup groaned in annoyance as he remembered the daunting task ahead of him. But he still smiled for his father's curiosity. "Come on down to the forge, and I'll show you."

The duo went down to see Gobber plugging away at something.

"Mornin' Gobber!" The chief shouted.

"Ah! Stoick!" Then in a more hushed tone, "Wait till you see this!" Then he looked to his apprentice. "Good to see you awake, lad."

"It's good to be awake." He grinned. "I can't help but feel like all I did yesterday will look totally different now that I'm

refreshed."

"Nah, I roughed out any kinks after you left yesterday." The blacksmith chattered.

Out on the table, a set of fine decorative weapons lay. Five pieces; a hammer, an axe, a sword, a spear, and a shield. Each piece matched the set in color, design, and emblem. The emblem of the Hofferson clan.

Hiccup knew his father didn't understand the finesse of most things he did, but the man could appreciate a good weapon. The chief examined the gifts with awe. "I know what I want Odin to give me for Snoggletog." He said, slack jawed.

Hiccup smiled in pride. "Now, there's one final thing. I know you won't appreciate this as much as the weapons, but it's important." Hiccup took a small black box out of his pocket and handed it to his father. The older man looked at it inquisitively. "Open it."

Inside lay the oath ring, resting on satin, and sparkling in the fire light of the forge.

"Aye," said he, "the oath ring is very important." Carefully, he picked up the ring and examined the intricate detail on the edges of it. "This must have taken you a while."

"Eh," he shrugged. "An all nighter."

"She'll love it."

Hiccup sighed. "I sure hope so."

Dragon training, Hiccup's pride and joy. If there was ever a place where he could have an ego, it would be when he was teaching. Although, he didn't, he was much too humble.

"Today's lesson is on communication. As we know, communication is important in every relationship, parent and child, siblings, and husband and wife." The last part was spoken a bit shakily. "We've discussed this before, since we all know that dragons sometimes know more than we do. But today, we're going to study it a bit deeper."

Ruffnut raised her hand.

"Yes, Ruff?"

"Where's Fishlegs?"

"That's actually a good question, and I'll answer it in a moment." He waved Toothless over.

"Who knows a dragon's best sense?"

Astrid spoke up. "Hearing, sight being very close behind, then smell. They are very poor in taste and touch."

"As notable in a gronckle." Snotlout chuckled. "They eat rocks."

"Correct and correct. Dragons can hear sounds that we can't, whether it's higher, lower, or quieter, a dragon's hearing is far superior. So, today we're going to practice borrowing our dragon's hearing. I've had Fishlegs hide out in the sea spires with a whistle. The sound is much too high pitched for humans to hear, so your objective is to find him."

"Is it a race?!" Snotlout got excited.

"No. We'll be taking turns."

"Oh come on," he whined. "A little competition never hurt anyone!"

"Because I want you to focus on your dragon, not trying to beat everyone else. In the future, you may not know what you're looking for, so you need to depend on your dragon."

Snotlout whined like a spoiled child.

"I'll go first." He mounted Toothless. "Also, I told him to hide, but I don't know where, so this is learning for all of us." He then took off into the sky.

With Hiccup's help, Toothless flew effortlessly through the many spires, twisting and spiraling in all sorts of fast turns and narrow escapes. It was like every other flight the duo went on, much too mundane. Hiccup's thoughts soon were drifting to what was to happen later that evening. The oath ring in his inside pocket felt unbelievably heavy.

As the teen was preoccupied, Toothless heard the slight ringing of the whistle and turned harshly. As Hiccup had learned a long time ago, an object in motion tended to stay in motion. So while Toothless veered off to the side, Hiccup flung right off Toothless, and went flying into a nearby cliff. Well, he would have if Toothless hadn't flipped, hit him with his tail, and caught him backwards on his back.

A bit out of sorts, Hiccup and Toothless went right back to sitting on the cliff face with the others. His hair sticking out every which way, he grimaced. "Okay, so that's what not to do."

Snotlout scoffed. "Let me show you how it's done!" He said proudly before taking off.

"You okay, Hiccup?" Astrid asked concerned.

"Peachy. Why?"

"Well, you never have problems flying unless there's something wrong."

"Oh, yeah, it's just my dad. I've got a lot on my mind." He shrugged.

"About that project you were working on?"

"Huh? Oh y-yeah, yes, yes!" He agreed. "That's exactly

right!"

"Well, tell me when you can, okay? It's not like you to be allâ€¦weird."

Tuffnut laughed. "Did you just say that Hiccup isn't weird?"

"Okay," She admitted. "Weird in this way is not normal."

He smirked.

Snotlout touched down only moments later. "Fifth spire on the left, there's a niche."

"Good job Snotlout. Let's give Fishlegs a few minutes to re-hide." Hiccup said while absently scratching his fake leg.

Tuffnut narrowed his eyes on Hiccup's action. "It's your leg okay?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, it just itches."

Astrid looked perplexed as well. "Your fake leg, not the stub, but the actual leg, is itchy?"

"Yeah." He said it like it was the most normal thing in the world. At their confused faces, he nodded in understanding. "It's a phantom pain. Gobber explained it to me. My brain thinks that my leg is still here, so it's receiving an imaginary signal that my leg itches. We don't really know why this happens, but most people who lose a limb feel pain, itchiness, warmth, cold, and tingling."

The twin's eyes glazed over as he talked.

"You sound like a book." Snotlout sneered.

"Hey, you asked." Hiccup shrugged.

"I'm next," Astrid spoke as Stormfly turned toward the edge. The Nadder burst into the sky, taking it's beautiful rider with her. Hiccup leaned on Toothless's head and watched as Astrid gracefully soared through the sky.

Soon, she would be his bride. Hiccup blushed and shook his head in embarrassment, why was he thinking like that already? He hadn't even asked her. Still, his gaze ventured back to the blonde as she punched the air in victory. She was beautiful, brave, threatening, but also kind, considerate, and smart. In his mind, even her flaws were perfect. He would never admit it to her, but he liked it when she punched him. She had to come in contact with him, right? As the thought transpired, he could only sigh at his own patheticness. Meanwhile, the twins and Snotlout watched in confusion and slight amusement at the boy's changing facial expressions and silent internal battle. Whatever was on his mind seemed to be very interesting. And yet, no one had the guts to ask what it was.

After training, Hiccup began his way to the forge, ready to put the next part of his plan into motion. Astrid caught up to him first.

"Hey, Hiccup!" She smiled. "You've been so busy lately, I was wondering if you wanted to come riding with me?"

He blushed. "No, thank you for the offer, Astrid—but I have..stuff—" he faltered. "But, maybe later tonight? Would you meet me on the beach at sunset?"

Her fading smile came right back when he said that. "Sure! Until then, I'll be out exploring! You're missing out!"

"I know!" He rolled his eyes.

"Catch ya later!" And she was gone.

Hiccup smiled at how perfect this was. Really, with her gone, he could do the next thing without worry. With that, he headed more quickly to the forge.

"Astrid, will you marry me?"

Hiccup was on the beach. It was close to sunset, but not quite. He needed a few moments to prepare himself anyway. Toothless was there for emotional support, and he was also acting as Astrid while Hiccup practiced.

"Astrid, I have something I'd like to ask—will you marry me?"

Toothless's eyes narrowed.

"No good?" He stood tall and puffed out his chest. "Astrid, as your senior, and son of the chief, I implore you to marry me!"

The dragon huffed.

He tried again. "Astrid; you, me, married. Whatcha say?"

Again, the dragon huffed, harder this time.

"My darling, marry me and I'll make you the richest woman on Berk."

Toothless shook his head.

"You're right, she'd be insulted by a bribe." Hiccup got down on his knees. "PLEASE ASTRID, MARRY ME! I BEG YOU!"

Toothless rolled over in uproarious laughter, kicking up sand in giddy.

"That's not the reaction I want—" Hiccup sighed.

"What's so funny?" A voice spoke.

The boy spun on his good foot and came face to face with the person he had been thinking of. "Astrid! W-w-what brings you here?"

She cocked an eyebrow, "Uh, you asked me to come?"

He winced. "Right."

"So," She crossed her arms. "Are you going to tell me what's up?"

Hiccup pursed his lips. "You don't beat about the bush, do you?"

"What's the point of that?" She swayed on her feet, looking out to the water. "I figured you invited me here so we could talk in private. We haven't really had any alone time in a while."

"True, true. And you're right, that is what I asked you here for." He looked away from her curious eyes and ground his foot into the sand. "I just don't know how to say it."

"I'm patient."

Hiccup chortled, that being very far from the truth. He blew air out of his mouth in anxiety. His eyes flickered around the beach before landing on her face, once again. "Well, I'll just say it." He exhaled deeply and took her hand. "Astrid Hofferson, will you be my bride?"

She looked at him with wide eyes, stunned beyond comprehension. He was pensive, waiting for any reaction. A hug, a punch, anything, just her staring at him made him feel sick.

Finally, she squinted up her face. "Is this a joke?"

"What? No!"

"This is one of of your sick jokes!" She accused.

"No, I swear!"

"I kiss you, after you scared me to death, and then, I figured since you didn't tease me about it back then, that you were mature enough to understand! And now you choose to tease me about it? I thought you were my friend!" She started to stalk off to Stormfly.

"I am! Astrid please, listen to me!" He called after. Thankfully, she wasn't running and he caught up to her. "Astrid please, it's not my decision. I have to get married!"

She turned to look at him, but still showed intense anger on her face.

"My dad is demanding I get married, please Astrid, Iâ€|" His words ran dry.

"So it's just an obligation?" She said, scarily calm.

"Yes. No. I don't know!" A part of him really did want to marry Astrid, because honestly, he had been in love with her forever.

"Forget it, Haddock." She turned away again.

"Astrid please!" He grabbed her hand.

She turned sharply and snapped it out of his grip. "Touch me again, and I won't go easy on you, just because you're disabled."

That was a low blow, even for Astrid.

"Pleaseâ€|" His voice was just a whisper.

"I hate begging." She sneered.

Hiccup was unable to say anything else as she mounted Stormfly and took off into the sky.

Toothless trotted over after the fight was over and nudged his friend's arm. "Well," he said scornfully. "That could have gone better."

The Nightfury purred in sympathy as he saw the glassy look in Hiccup's eyes. The boy sighed. It wasn't the worst thing to ever happen to him, he was Hiccup after all. He could handle it. He kept telling himself this as he sniveled like a child. "Now to break the news to dad." He sighed. "Come on bud."

Back at the Haddock residence, Stoick sat, stoking the fire. When his son and Toothless came in, he lit up. "So, how'd it go? Do I have a wedding to conduct next Frigg's day? Of course I do! Like she would say no!"

Hiccup said nothing, just looked to the floor.

"Oh." He seemed to get the message. "That bad, eh?"

"She'll never speak to me again." He whispered.

Stoick was less than helpful. "Just give her a few days to calm down, then ask again. If not, I'll find you someone else."

"Dad, I don't want anyone else." He pleaded. "I care about her so muchâ€|"

"Then you better find a way to make her agree!" Stoick laughed. "Don't feel too bad, son. Your mother was in love with another man when we wed. But after years, she lost interest in him and loved me instead."

Hiccup knew the story, but it didn't help. His mother had always been so much stronger than him. He didn't know what to do with an arranged marriage.

"Why don't you get some rest son? You look like you just traveled through Niflheim. Things will look brighter in the morning."

Hiccup refrained from arguing the small possibility that he was right. Instead, Toothless and him traveled upstairs, where Hiccup was greeted with yet another sleepless night.

Meanwhile, Astrid had taken a flight around the island to calm down. After she left Stormfly outside, she entered her house, still fuming. Sitting in the main room were her parents, waiting with smiles on their faces.

"What?" She asked.

"Anything you want to tell us?"

"No."

"Hiccup didn't ask you something?"

Astrid groaned. "You knew?!"

"Of course, he came and offered the bride price. Just look at this!" Her father excitedly got up from his chair and went over to the table. Astrid looked in guilt at the fine weapons expertly crafted and emblazoned with the Hofferson family crest.

"He made them! Isn't that amazing!" Mrs. Hofferson gushed. She could be so affectionate sometimes. "So, when's the wedding? Did he give you a ring?"

Astrid backed away from her parents and their questions. "I refused." She said softly.

Her father frowned. "What?"

"I refused." She stated again.

"Astridâ€¦" Her mother started. "I thought you liked Hiccup, what made you say no?"

The girl shook her head shamefully. "At first I thought he was making fun of me, but then he said it was obligationâ€¦I don't want to marry him because I have to!" Then she grabbed her arm. "I'm not ready to be a brideâ€¦when I think about itâ€¦I just get so angry! I was training to be a warrior not more then a few months ago. I'm still training to defend everyone from dragon backâ€¦I can't just become a little house wife! I couldn't stand it!"

Mrs. Hofferson enveloped her disgruntled daughter. "It's okay, love. Why don't you think about it? Hiccup really is a wonderful young man."

"I don't want to think about it!" She burst free and charged up the stairs. Up in the loft, she leaned against the door and breathed, willing everything to just go away. The young blonde resigned to climb into bed. This wasn't just going to go away, she knew that, she just hoped that it would work out.

3. Divine Intervention

The previous day's events drove hard into Astrid's mind and persisted in her dreams. One vision was that of her wedding day, to Hiccup of course. When she leaned in to kiss him, his face turned into Stoick's, complete with beard and helmet.

"Aye me lass, you make a great wife! Wide hips! Perfect for baring children!" He boomed in front of the crowd. The audience laughed heartily in agreement. Not long after, she hugged him and snapped him in half, literally. He still had Stoick's face and continued to shout things at her, despite the disuse of his lower body.

Another dream found her within Hiccup's arms. It was a glimpse into some sort of twisted future, as he was a large, burly man. His jaw sharp, and his eyes even sharper. He dipped her in his muscular arms and spoke to her, smoothly in an unknown language, but his voice sounded divine.

"_Chica, me gusta tu cara._" His tongue slid across his lips as she plainly melted in his grasp. Kissy Kissy.

She awoke that morning with confusion. As the blonde sat dumbfounded in her bed, she contemplated going to the Elder for consultation, but inevitably, she decided against it. She looked out the window and saw Hiccup come out of his house to feed Toothless. One glimpse of his auburn hair, and she was ready to pounce on him. One thing was true, she would come around when she felt like it. No amount of apologies or pleading would get her to forgive him. Blood would need to be spilt.

Hiccup did his own morning chores, unaware of the angry blonde staring daggers into his back. He cleaned the house, fed the tamed, but riderless dragons, and helped Gobber in the forge. After, he was released to go flying.

On Toothless' back, the boy felt freedom and relief. No more excruciating hours of worry and turmoil. The wind whistled through his hair, his eyes watering from the speed. The cold scales of his best friend moved against the skin of his wrists. Hours passed in a moment, and soon, he found it was time to return for dragon training. He didn't want to go. Dread spilled over his bones as he tried to think of an excuse, anything to get him out of his position. With a sigh, Hiccup landed outside the ring, knowing it was the right thing to do. He was the first one there, luckily, since he had no idea what he was going to teach on.

Snotlout and the twins came together not long after. Followed by Fishlegs, and finally Astrid who was feeling the same dread for training as Hiccup was.

"So, what're we doin' today?" Asked 'Lout. "Bustin' heads and taking names? Dragon battles?"

Hiccup shrugged. "I've been busy, I didn't think of a lesson plan."

"I bet that's not the only thing you didn't think aboutâ€¦" Astrid snidely remarked under her breath. Hiccup and Fishlegs were the only ones who heard. Hiccup cleared his throat while Fishlegs' baited question on the proposal was answered. He stepped away from the girl, afraid she would breathe fire in his face.

"Well, what do you guys want to do? Nothingâ€¦violent." He added.

Fishlegs spoke up to help his friend. "We could practicing riding each other's dragons."

Hiccup looked relieved. "Good idea Fishlegs! That is an extremely important skill if your dragon and another rider are both taken out." Then he made a realization, "I'm afraid no one else can ride

Toothless though."

"And why not?" Asked Ruffnut. "I bet Toothless would like someone other than you riding him."

"Yeah," Astrid mumbled. "Being ridden by the same person who took away your ability to fly in the first placeâ€¦|Can't imagine that to be enjoyable."

Hiccup closed his eyes and sighed. That thought had gone through his head how many times? He had given the Nightfury a way to fly by himself as a present for Snoggletog, but he denied it, saving Hiccup's peace of mind, and declaring his loyalty. Still, Hiccup kept the tail, just in case. "Regardless, Toothless' tail is difficult to operate, and the harness only works with my metal foot."

The teens were placated and swapped rides. Fishlegs finally got a dragon capable of his size, on the Monstrous Nightmare. Astrid and Snotlout each took a head on the Hideous Zippleback. Tuff was on Stormfly, and Ruff on the Gronckle, since Fishlegs didn't trust anyone else to take care of his 'baby'.

"I know how much you guys like a race, so first dragon around the island twice wins."

"Wins what?"

"I don't know, what do you want?" He shrugged.

Astrid cracked her knuckles. "To punch you in the face."

"Whoa there, Blondie, I don't think-â€¦|"

"Great! On your markâ€¦|" Counted down Snotlout.

"Wait!"

"Get set!"

"No!"

"GO!"

Later that evening, Hiccup went home with a black eye and a bloody nose, seeing as both Astrid and Snotlout had to win, being on the same dragon and all. "It had to be the two that want to hurt me the mostâ€¦|" He sighed, walking in the door.

Stoick looked at him with wide eyes, smiled, and congratulated him. "It's a badge of honor, a fight for valor."

Hiccup didn't have the heart to tell the man that it was just a case of poor timing and lack of authority. Hiccup cooled his eye with a block of ice, definitively deciding that he needed to wait a few days to talk to Astrid.

He avoided her at all costs. Even when he did gain the courage to talk to her, she would stand with her arms crossed, her weight shifted on one leg. That pose always made him feel weak and stutter like a moron. And she knew it. He once tried to catch her in the

woods, but turned around promptly when she chucked her axe at him. The week was drawing to a fast close.

Loki's day, Lurdag, the last day of the week, also known (and despised as) bathing day. All families had a tub somewhere on their property. A solid iron tub, sometimes wood, was filled with water and used to clean the body. The Haddock household was no different, except what set them apart is how Hiccup enhanced their tub.

Fishlegs strolled over to the chief's home and knocked on the door. Receiving no answer, he peeked his head in. "Hiccup?"

"Back here!" The boy called. Fishlegs went through the house and came out the back, to see Hiccup sitting in the tub, Toothless lazily sitting on the ground. Smoke was coming from under the tub. "Hey Fishlegs." He said casually.

As it was not uncommon to come across someone bathing, it was strange to see smoke from a tub of water.

"What?" Hiccup finally asked as he noticed his friend's stare.

"I was just why is your tub on fire?"

Hiccup leaned over to the side, then smiled. "Oh, it's this awesome idea I had! Check it out, I dug a hole, and put wood in it, then I placed the tub over it, but left enough room to add more wood, smoke to get out, and Toothless to light it."

Fishlegs looked closer as there was indeed a pit with fire under it. "And so the water gets hot?"

"Yep! Feel it!"

The tubby boy touched his fingers to the surface, slightly afraid it would be boiling, but to his delight, it was just right. "Hiccup! This is brilliant! Can I borrow the idea?"

"Sure, I call it, 'The Hot Tub'." He said proudly.

"Eh, why not, 'The Fire Bath'? 'Hot Tub' sounds lame."

"Whatever, I came up with it." He leaned back.

"So"

"Oh right, did you need something?"

"Well," Legs nervously scratched his head. "I was planning on asking you earlier, but then I wasn't sure, but" He sighed. "How's it going with Astrid?"

Hiccup let his head fall over the back of the tub. "Awful. I've been trying to clear everything up, but every time I try to talk to her, she ignores me or says something really condescending."

"But, you've only got a few more days!"

"I know" He sighed. "I blew it Fishlegs, soon I'll be married to a

troll." He stuck his face underwater where bubbles floated out.

"Come on, Hiccup. It's not like you to give up! You killed the Red Death even after the tribe took your dragon and all the boats!"

"But that's dragons! I know dragons! I love dragons! I'm an expert on dragons! But I'm a loser with girls! I stutter, I'm hopeless, and I'm shorter than all of them!"

"So?"

"Girls don't like short guys!"

"Well, in a case like you and Astrid's, wouldn't she be the dominant one?"

"Where are you going with this?"

"So, with you being smaller, it's more likely that she'd agree to the marriage, so she can feel like the head of the relationship."

Hiccup could only gape. "What are you?"

"I think that the reason she said no was not because of you. I know she likes you, the whole town knows that. I think it's just the timing."

"What timing? This is the age teens get married!"

"She has ventured off quite a bit, I wonder if it has to do with her menstrual cycle."

"Don't. Just, don't go there." Hiccup's face contorted in a grimace.

"Sorry. How's your nose?"

"Better. Hurts, but you know, what doesn't?" There was a long pause before he asked, "What should I do?"

Fishlegs scratched his chin. "I don't know. Bring her some flowers or food! Who doesn't love food?"

"Like a peace offering?"

"Yeah! Then apologize, and tell her why you picked her to ask."

"That could work! You're brilliant, Fishlegs!"

Hiccup finished bathing quickly and got dressed. He then took Toothless out to a clearing that was well known for flowers. But this was Hiccup we're talking about. These were no run of the mill flowers, he scoured that field and slopes of nearby mountains for the fullest, brightest, and best. Soon, he had a bouquet of lilies, irises, snowbells, edelweiss, violets, aster, and one large white reinrose in the middle.

He quickly went home to clean himself up. A nicer set of clothes, and

his hair tamed (at least attempted) and he was ready to go. He strolled down the stairs, flowers in hand.

"Hiccup!" It was _that_ tone of voice. "Where are you going?"

"To Astrid's!" He kicked an invisible rock with his prosthetic.

Stoick sighed. "About that!"

Hiccup looked up in surprise. Had his dad finally changed his mind about the marriage?

"You don't need to propose to Astrid." He stated.

Hiccup's shoulders relaxed. "Well, I still have to go over there to apologize! I don't want her to be mad at me forever!" He gripped the handle of the door.

"There's more." He said sternly. "Bucket and Mulch went on a fishing trip to the far southeast. I asked them to deliver the message to the Gaul tribe."

The flowers fell to the floor.

"What?" B-but dad! I had a few days still! You can't- they can't-!"

"I'm sorry Hiccup. If you still choose to court Astrid, and she agrees to marry you, you will be the one telling the Gauls that the wedding is off. They'll be here in a week's time." With that, the man took a silent seat by the fire.

Hiccup's mind was reeling. By telling Darla that the wedding was off, the alliance between the two tribes could be endangered. And he still didn't know what to do about Astrid, at that. He heard Toothless whine softly and looked to see his friend holding the fallen bouquet. Why let it go to waste? Still, he felt unsure about giving it to her. So he resolved to leave it on her window sill. She'd still get it, and it'd only be a guess on who gave it to her.

The next day, Hiccup prepared to deliver the news to the dragon trainers. After all, they were his friends, they deserved to know. There were other reasons of course. Hiccup waited on the cliff face as Snotlout and the twins came up.

"Yeah, it totally swallowed my whole hand." He heard Tuffnut say. "It was the coolest feeling ever, terrible terror stomach acid."

"You should have seen him," Added Ruffnut. "He was waving the little thing everywhere. I waited until he started crying before I made the terror throw up."

"I was not crying!" He defended. "I was just laughing with so much joy, my eyes watered."

Hiccup shook his head as Fishlegs and Astrid came up and joined the group. Astrid looked different, not so hostile. And what was that by her ear?

"So, what're we doing today?" Snotlout asked.

Hiccup simpered looking at his friends. "Actuallyâ€|there's something really important I have to talk to you guys about."

"Is it the end of dragon training?" Lout asked.

"Did something happen?" Ruff followed up.

"Did someone die?!" Tuff asked excitedly before being elbowed in the ribs.

"No." Hiccup sighed. "Iâ€|I'm getting married."

The group was silent in shock before Snotlout burst into laughter. "You? Married? Yeah right!"

"Yeah," Hiccup shrugged. "I couldn't believe it either. But my dad decided that for the security of the tribe, I needed to get married as soon as possible."

"So who's the unfortunate lady?" Tuffnut smirked.

"You can be the one to judge who's unfortunateâ€|" He winced as he looked away. "Darla the Disagreeable of the Gaul tribe."

This time, Snotlout _and_ the twins laughed. "Darla the Dwarf-toed troll?!"

"I heard she's lit her head on fire so many times, her hair is black and singed, permanently." Ruff gossiped.

"I heard that her fingernails are all black and her toes are green!" Tuff laughed.

"I heard she has a tree growing out of her belly-button!" Snotlout added.

"Okay, yes we've all heard the rumorsâ€|but can we please stop?"

"Why? You gonna puke?" Teased Snotlout.

"Can we watch?!" Tuff asked, ecstatic, his sister nodding in agreement.

"No, I justâ€|I don't want to think about it. I already can't sleep at night."

Astrid finally spoke up. "Why Darla?" She sounded sad. "Don't we already have an alliance with the Gauls?"

Ruffnut spoke, saying what everyone was thinking. "Why can't you just marry Astrid?"

The blonde in question blushed and looked away in shame. That's when Hiccup realized she had a flower behind her ear. One of the flowers he gave her.

"I guess it's just not that easy." His voice was soft.

"So what now?" Fishlegs asked. "What about dragon training?"

"Until further notice, I won't be teaching. You guys can meet up or whatever."

"It won't be the same with you." Ruffnut replied, oddly sentimental.

Hiccup smiled sadly. "Well, my dad wants us to make a presentation, to show the Gauls that dragons aren't as scary as they think."

"What kind of presentation?" Snotlout crossed his arms. "They are dragons after all."

"Well, show them that our dragons are just like any other pet. What they like, things you do with them, stuff like that."

"Wait, don't they have different dragons that far south?"

"Exactly. That's why we show them ours. Give all the basic information, name, types, class, shot limit, all that fun stuff."

Fishlegs got excited.

"My dad said they'd come sometime by the end of the week. So, prepare." He mounted Toothless. "Oh, and don't blow anything up."

"That's it?" Asked Snotlout. "Where are you going?"

Hiccup sighed. "I have a lot of mental preparation to do." And with that, he flew off.

Astrid watched with a heavy heart as Toothless disappeared over the mountains. When she came back to reality, everyone was staring at her. "What?"

"Are you going to be okay, Astrid?" Ruffnut asked, genuinely concerned.

Astrid realized her face was hot from the anger and she looked away. "Of course, who needs Hiccup anyway? He's just a scrawny little screw up." She lied.

"True." Stated Tuffnut with a smirk. "But he's your scrawny little screw up."

"I think this calls for some girl talk." Ruffnut cracked her knuckles and grabbed Astrid by the arm. "Come on, we'll sort it all out."

The two females sat on the cliff edge looking out over the bay. "So, you knew nothing about this? I mean, he didn't bother to tell you first?"

"I didn't know about Darla." She confessed. "But I knew his dad wanted him to marry someone. But I didn't really think that deeply

into it."

"Didn't you say anything to him? Did you volunteer? Because Odin knows I'd never marry him."

This is when Astrid looked guiltily over to her friend. "He proposed to me firstâ€|and I refused him."

This confused the other girl. "Why would you do that?"

"I don't know! I didn't think I was ready! But thenâ€|" She sighed. "This is all just a mess."

"Yep."

"What should I do?"

"Why don't you try to talk to him? I bet he'd understand if you just apologized."

"I don't know if I can do that. I mean, I've been so rotten to him the past weekâ€|"

"You could always fight Darla for him."

The blond laughed. "Yeah right, I heard her sweat can melt the flesh of any human."

"Gee, poor Hiccup." This at least lightened the mood and the girls went back to the village together.

Hiccup laid wide awake long after the sun had set. He could hear his father's snores and yet, sleep eluded him. He turned on his side and curled unto a fetal position. For once in a long time, he felt very alone and heart broken. Viridian eyes shifted to the onyx reptile who slumbered peacefully only a few feet away. His best friend. Toothless didn't understand what was happening in his rider's life, he didn't know of his impending doom. Because of that, Hiccup was grateful. Just to have someone that was not pitying him was refreshing. He got out of bed and sauntered over to his dragon.

"Toothless." He whispered.

His large feline eyes flickered a bit.

"Hey budâ€|"

The dragon's face twitched and scrunched. Hiccup knelt before him. He seemed to get the message and unfurled his wings and paws. Hiccup crawled into his embrace and cuddled against his tummy, using his paw as a pillow. Toothless didn't seem to mind as he rewrapped his wing and was soon asleep again.

Hiccup reveled at the low beating thumps of the dragons heart. It served as a reminder that although he laid against cool scales, the beast was alive, capable of love and care. The boy rested his cheek against the cool, soft underbelly and fell asleep with words on his lips.

"Thanks, bud."

4. Arrival

Warmth. Sweet serenity, peace, and relaxation. Hiccup's mind was in a fog, not quite awake yet, but to date, this was the most comfortable sleep he had had.

"HHHHIIICCCCCUUUUUPPPP!" A boisterous shout shook the house. "Where are you lad?! You can't hide forever!"

Oh yeah, he was next to Toothless. He attempted to get up, but the large lizard was reluctant to move. Soon, the boy was a tangled mess of limbs, wings, and a tail. "Here dad!" He called, poking his head out of the scaly mess.

Stoick came up the stairs and saw his son. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Uhâ€¦It's a long story." He shrugged.

Stoick merely raised his eyebrows as a way to say, 'try me.'

"Uhâ€¦Iâ€¦couldn't sleep last night."

The chief pursed his lips. "That didn't seem like that long of a story."

Hiccup finally got out of Toothless' grip and came to stagger in the room. "So what's the big deal? Why are you yelling?"

"The 'big deal' is that it's high noon, and I couldn't find my son who's supposed to be helping me prepare for the Gauls!"

"Oh wow, it's noon? I'm sorryâ€¦I guess I just haven't been sleeping well and I needed my rest."

"You can rest when you're dead!" He called encouragingly, walking down the stairs. "I have a list as long as my arm to prepare for our guests."

"Greatâ€¦" Mumbled Hiccup, "I can't wait to get started." He looked back at Toothless who stared at him like a hopeless kitten.

Stoick had him running errands up and down the village. "Make sure the Thorenson's are fixing up their barn to house peopleâ€¦check on the dragon stable to make sure everything is secureâ€¦go check in on the fishermenâ€¦ask Uglythug if he and his wife are preparing yak for the feastâ€¦etc."

The chores stretched over days. At night, Hiccup would drag himself to bed and then back out in the morning. He was fortunate that his father allowed him a break every once in awhile to take Toothless out for a spin. Or else, the dragon would go stir crazy and start getting into things. The boy never had the chance to think about Astrid, let alone talk to her.

Sun's day rolled around, and the Gaul's had not yet arrived. Hiccup's main concern was to check in on the dragon trainers about their

presentations. Namely, the twins and Snotlout. He found his cousin at the ring first, smoke rising from a pit.

"Hey Snotloutâ€|how's it going?"

The bulkier kid looked his cousin up and down. "I should be asking you the same thingâ€|too busy to come up with your own idea? Well, you can't have mine! It took me four days to come up with it!"

"I have my own idea. Trust me. I'm just checking to make sure nothing's going to explode or go up in flamesâ€|and Hookfang has a tendency to do that."

"Yep, so I'm not going to risk that. I will say that he ignites, but not actually have him do it. Instead, I'm going to demonstrate the usefulness of the ash left behind."

Hiccup was impressed. "Wow, I didn't know you had that in you, Snotlout."

"Well, I may have asked Gobber for some helpâ€|"

Hiccup looked at him skeptically.

He rolled his eyes. "Fine, it took me four days to ask Gobber. He told me how to do it. Check it out! I made soap, salt, a weapon polish, fertilizer, and toothpaste! Who knew this stuff could be so useful, right?"

"I'm just glad to see something very productive going on. Good job Snotlout. Any idea where the twins are?"

The older boy shrugged before an explosion in the woods went off.

"Never mind, I found them. Catch ya later." He mounted Toothless and was soon off to the site of the blast.

When he landed, he found the twins, their Zippleback, and, surprisingly, Fishlegs. Tuffnut was gnawing on a burnt chicken leg.

"Hey guys, how's it going?"

"Ehâ€|" Shrugged Ruffnut.

"You wanna taste our Barf Chicken? It's a little charred, and has a distinct flavor of gasâ€|" Tuffnut spoke through full cheeks.

"No, thanksâ€|" Hiccup declined. "So Fishlegs, why are you out here with them?"

"That is a great question, my fine friend." Was that smugness in his voice? "Care to share, Ruffnut?"

The blonde rolled her eyes. "We were having a hard time coming up with a non-destructive trick, so we asked Fishlegs for advice."

"Well, that's nothing to be ashamed of. Snotlout stole an idea from

Gobber, so why not? What's the trick?"

"We're cooking chicken," stated Ruff.

"But in unconventional methods." added Tuff.

"Instead of turning it on a spit to cook it evenlyâ€|"

"Barf and Belch roast it from all sides at the same time."

"Huh, sounds like a good idea."

Fishlegs came into the conversation. "Right now we're testing to see how much fire and how much cook time it needs."

"And we may need something to cover up thisâ€|gassy taste." Tuff smacked his tongue. "Makes me nauseous."

"Try sage." Suggested Hiccup, knowing a little about cooking, since that was one of his chores. Then he turned to Fishlegs, "While I'm out here, I may as well ask, what are you and Meatlug doing?"

"I thought we might play a wholesome game of toss the sheep, to show that Gronckles are very loving and careful creatures."

"Aw man!" Tuffnut shouted. "I was looking forward to seeing you do a flying trick, since you have the smallest dragon!"

"Sure, make fun of the fat kid on the little dragon! It's funny every time you do!"

Tuffnut laughed. "It really is."

"Well, I like your idea Fishlegs. It's unique, and I think it will go over well." Hiccup sighed in relief. "I think I can safely say that I'm confident that you guys will do well. I have to go, but I'll see you guys later."

"Hey Hiccup," spoke up Ruff. "Astrid's trick is pretty cool."

Hiccup simpered. "I figured it would be, she's Astrid after all."

"Were you going to go check on her?"

"Iâ€|I kinda assumed she'd have everything under controlâ€|"

"OH. I see how it is." Ruff crossed her arms. "Now that you've gotten yourself engaged, you don't have any time for Astrid."

"No! Oh Odin, no. I just meant that she was competent. Can we just not talk about that?" Truth is, he was trying to forget Astrid. Her rejection had hurt far more than he was willing to accept. "I'll see you guys later."

â€" -

Hiccup stood on the docks. Animal fat in his hair to slick it back. He wore his jacket in best repair, and his leg was shined. He looked good, but no where as spiffy as he had looked for Astrid.

The large boat of Gaul soldiers and delegates pulled into place. A little ways off, Bucket and Mulch's dingy docked as well.

"Welcome! Welcome my friends!" Stoick greeted with his booming voice.

The first man off the boat was the Chief, Blackmold. His size was equal to that of Stoick, and his heartily laugh just as strong. "Stoick! My friend, it's great to be back in Berk!"

The two men laughed in gayety while others came off the boat, greeting the vikings. Finally, a large dark shadow descended from the ship. Her scraggily black hair stuck up in every direction. The hump that was on her back had gotten larger, and her smell preceded her, the smell of month old cheese and broken dreams.

Hiccup avoided breathing out of his nose and attempted to smile.

Her bulging eyes landed on the teen, as she snorted a glob of mucus back into her beak like nose. "Hiccup!" She cried with her masculine voice. She thundered down the ramp and lifted him off the ground, significantly cracking his back. "You haven't changed a bit. Still the tiny little weakling I remember!" She punched his arm, hard. "Although, you're missing a leg nowâ€¦so you're even smaller!"

Hiccup kept smiling as the blows just kept coming. He allowed the insults to be tucked away deep, so not as to bother him. Then it was his turn. "Well, you've certainlyâ€¦grown. You're muchâ€¦fuller." He attempted to be polite. He had to look up to meet her face, since she was so tall.

"Aye," Stoick cut in, seeing his son blundering. "And your eyes aren't crossed anymore! Which way are you looking lass?" He laughed.

"I control one eye at a time, like a lizard." She smiled, focusing one eye on Stoick and one on Hiccup.

"It's the darnedest thing." Blackmold added. "She gets kicked with a mule, her eyes go crossed, she gets smacked with a hammer, they go the other way. One of Thor's mysteries."

Stoick laughed jovially as Hiccup was only able to stand stricken and filled with dread. Up on the ramp leading to the village, Astrid watched with a pit in her stomach. That was Darla? Oh, what had she done...?

"Well, why don't you give Darla a tour of the village, son? I'll get the men put up. Tonight, we have a feast for our friends!" The two chieftains continued on their joyful reunion while Hiccup barely contained his eye roll.

They started the tour, Hiccup going through the dull information on the seven generations of dragon slaying that he was always required to give his charge, when Darla interrupted. "That's nice, what happened to your leg?"

He was thrown off for a moment at her sudden question, but then he

recovered. "I lost it in a battle with a dragon."

She laughed. "Yeah right, what really happened?"

"No, I'm serious. Did you guys not hear about it? It's big news up hereâ€|even our enemies knowâ€|My friend Astrid and I discovered a dragon Queen, as we call it, the Seadragonus Giganticus Maximus. The size of a mountain, six eyes and rows of razor sharp teeth! He commanded the dragons to bring back a kill or they would be eaten themselves."

"I see," she played along, "So how did you beat this sea monster?"

"Well, it's known that dragons produce a gas when they breath fire, and since this was a massive dragon, it had to produce an immense amount of gas, so we waited for the right timing and then Toothless shot a plasma blast into the dragon's mouthâ€|"

"Who's Toothless?"

"My dragon, a Nightfury." He said proudly.

Darla scoffed.

"So the explosion caused this huge fireball, and as we were trying to escape, the dragon's tail came out of nowhere and knocked me off of Toothless, unconscious. When I woke up, I had the prosthetic. I was told that Toothless had dove after me and protected me."

A smile broke out in her rounded teeth and purple blistered lips as she began to laugh. "You haven't changed at all, Hiccup. Still tellin' wild and crazy stories."

"But I'm not making this up! Here, I'll show you!" By this time they were well into town. Hiccup whistled and from behind his longhouse came bounding the black dragon. It had taken two baskets of fish and some sincere pleading to get him to stay that morning, but apparently he didn't care. Toothless rushed to his owner and in a blink of an eye, changed his stance to protect his human. His tail wrapped around his tiny body as his pupils narrowed and a growl elicited from his mouth.

Darla stepped away from the dragon, but didn't run away screaming since she saw how friendly he was with Hiccup. The message from Stoick sprang to her mind as he mentioned that they were at peace with the dragons. He didn't say how or why, though.

"Toothless, be nice. This is Darla. She's â€|friend."

The dragon would not be persuaded as he promptly vomited on the ground.

Darla sneered at him. "Well, you're not so great yourself, Helpless."

"It's Toothless." Hiccup resolutely corrected.

The dragon in mention suddenly perked up, catching a familiar scent (How? Really, it's amazing since Darla was so potent). He slipped

between the buildings in a whirl and came out with Astrid in his mouth.

"Toothless! Put me down, right now! I mean it!"

Toothless did as commanded, right next to Hiccup, before hightailing it out of there. Darla looked the blonde over. "Eavesdropping?"

The axe wielder was silent.

Hiccup cleared his throat. "Darla, this is Astrid. Astrid, Darla."

The two girls had a stare down. Then the foreigner spoke up. "So, is this your girlfriend or something? Sorry, was. Since you know, you asked me here for a certain engagement." She spoke to Hiccup while looking at Astrid.

"No, just good friends." Astrid answered.

"Of course, Hiccup would never have a chance with you." She winked and glanced to the heavy axe on her back. "You'd probably kill him. Seeing as how annoying he can be sometimes."

Ever the chivalric one, Astrid narrowed her eyes. "For someone so ugly, you sure have a heart that matches."

"Excuse me?"

"I happen to like Hiccup, just the way he is. He's a good man. You should be grateful for this arrangement. You'll never get a greater guy."

"I think you misspoke, good boy. Hiccup's a good boy."

Astrid's nose flared as she wrenched her axe free. "Eat paint, wench!"

Hiccup took her arms. "Astrid, please calm down. I think you've helped enough."

The pretty girl tucked her weapon away and nodded. "I see how it is. Okay. I'm sorry." she replied curtly.

The two old friends looked at each other in a heart wrenching glance that spoke volumes. There were so many misunderstandings between them, and both came to accept in that moment that the other didn't see anything more than friendship. Simultaneously, Hiccup and Astrid's hearts broke as the future without the other shone back at them.

"See you later, Hiccup." Astrid whispered.

"Goodbye" He replied.

Darla, who was oblivious to the exchange grabbed Hiccup by the shoulder. "So I hope that lizard of yours is kept in a cage or something. Seems unstable, I don't know why you would keep a dragon as a pet. Even if they are peaceful now. Whoever decided that was a good idea must have had too many blows to the head, and I know about

blows to the head..."

Hiccup, however, was not listening. He was watching Astrid retreat back into town. The box with the oath ring in his pocket knocked against his chest. As he glanced over to Darla's hands, he found them much too like Snotlout's. The ring would never fit. He couldn't bare to see her wearing Astrid's ring anyway. With hope in his heart, he realized that he would have another chance to speak with her.

The feast came. Gaul's and Berkian's alike gathered at tables in the Great Hall. Mead and mutton were served, a gay time all around. But not all were in high spirits.

Hiccup looked like a toothpick as he sat next to his gargantuan father in the middle of the hall. The back wall, behind the fire place had been cleared for the academy's presentation. After a few bites of food, Hiccup was gestured to come and introduce the group by Gobber.

"Ladies and Vikings, friends and allies. It is with great pleasure as head of the Berk Dragon training academy to welcome you all here for a feast in honor of our friends, the Gauls!"

A round of applause.

"Tonight, the academy has prepared a presentation to entertain, and dare I say, educate you, in dragons of our people. As you may or may not know," he looked pointedly at Darla, "in the last few months, we have come to peace with the dragons on our island, by defeating the queen that so insnared them to a life of pillaging. Now, they are friends, pets, and part of our families. Please enjoy."

Another round of applause as he took his seat.

Gobber wobbled up to the front, a pink terrible terror on his shoulder. "Evenin', name's Gobber, and this is Toesnatch. Bein one of the smallest dragon's, she's a Terrible Terror. Despite her size, she can be quite the stinka. Terrors are quick and have sharp claws and teeth. Their fire skills are also very accurate, giving them the nickname, the snipers of the dragons. Terrors are a part of the Stoker class, but do not light themselves as other dragons in this type do. Now, I've only described what pests these dragons are, but they are also very useful. Allow me to demonstrate." He raised his arm and commanded his pet, "Toe, mead."

The lizard jumped from his arm, swooped over, grasped Stoick's mug in her tiny talons, and zipped back to her owner. "See? I didn' even have ta move. They're also handy when it comes to night time. Too dark to find the flint? Just give the tail a little yank and Wa-la! And when everythin's all said and done, you can relax with the terror, give her a little fish, scratch under her chin, and she'll love you forever." He bowed. "Thank you."

There was an applause as Stoick shouted, "can I have my drink back?!"

Meatlug galloped up front followed by a slightly shy Fishlegs. "Uh...hi." The chubby boy grinned. "Hi, Fishlegs here, and this is my Gronckle, Meatlug." The dragon nudged her owner and comforted him. His smile widened. "The Gronckle is a part of the boulder class, as

classified by her club-like tail, and her massive teeth and muscular jaw used for crushing rocks, chewing them up, and spitting them back out as lava."

There was a collective 'ooo' from the crowd.

"The Gronckle is one of the only dragons to fly forwards, backwards, side to side and even diagonal, do to its hummingbird-like wings. As seen by her wings, the Gronckle is not made for fast maneuvering in the air," then he leaned in closer to Meatlug, "no offense, girl.

"But look at the muscle in these legs! On the ground, the Gronckle is swift and very good at hiding. Her shot limit is six, but she can continue to spew lava after. They have a tendency to sleep a lot, even while flying."

Fishlegs reached over and hugged his precious friend. "Most of all, the Gronckle is a loving and motherly creature. Caring and great with kids!" He looked to the unimpressed Vikings. These tough burly men didn't really mind vicious pets.

Fishlegs wouldn't let it go, however. "To prove the gentleness of a Gronckle, Meatlug and I will play a simple game..."

A sheep waddled up to the boy before it was snatched up.

"â€|of Toss the sheep."

The crotchety old cabbage farmer from on top of the hill, affectionally known as Mildew, noticed the sheep, his sheep, and stood up in the back of the room. "Fungus!" He shouted.

"Ah," Gobber waved him down, "he'll love it."

Things were getting interesting as the crowd paid close attention. Fishlegs scurried to the other side of the room and, well, tossed the sheep. Meatlug caught it easily and flung it right back. All the while, the sheep bleated in terror as the crowd cheered like they were watching a sport.

"Fishlegs! Over here!" Snotlout called, getting involved.

After a few more tosses, Fungus landed back at Mildew's feet. A feeble 'meeaaa' and he fainted.

"Fungus!" The old man cried, kneeling by his pet.

"Eh," Gobber replied unsympathetically. "He'll be fine. Who's next?"

This is the one that Hiccup was dreading and looking forward to the most. The one he told himself he didn't need to worry about, but with her actions this morning...he was having second thoughts.

Astrid.

A muscle in his jaw involuntary clenched. His short fingernails scraped slowly against the fabric of his pants. His neck felt hot, was it the fire? His eyelids slid shut for a moment, longer than a

blink, but not long enough for anyone to notice.

The blonde was speaking. She was describing her dragon, all the facts and trivia he knew about the Deadly Nadder, so it didn't seem to matter whether he listened or not. Problem is, the more he tried to focus, the less he understood. He heard her, her vibrant vocals, her curt consonances, every flick of her tongue against her teeth, he was keenly aware of them all. Though through all of it, not a word got through. She had a basket of linens, and was draping the clothes on the spikes on the Nadder's tail. As she moved, her bangs slid over her eye and concealed it from view, just until she dipped her head and it moved back into place. Hiccup was completely entranced by the moving flames that reflected in her eyes, so hypnotic, soâ€¦|

THWACK.

The opposite wall of the hall was covered in Nadder spikes, each brandishing an article of clothing. Hiccup nearly had a heart attack as he had not seen it coming. He sat stiff as his dad clapped him on the back.

"Excellent show, boy!"

He turned his green eyes back to Astrid to see her bowing to the crowd and then retreating back. Snotlout was making his way up.

"Well, if you want Nadder splinters in your clothes, then go ahead. But I'm going to show you the true usefulness of a dragonâ€¦|" He boasted.

Snotlout began his presentation, and it was mostly bull. Hiccup looked askance to Darla, relieved to find her very engrossed with what Snotlout was saying. With her not paying attention, he slipped back to where Astrid was sitting, where he finally got to speak with her.

She peered up at him. "Hey Hiccup." Good, she was cordial. "Show's gone over pretty well so far. Let's just hope Snotlout doesn't bore everyone to tears." She smiled at him. Gods how he hated that smile!

He opened his mouth to reply, but words ceased on his lips. He was afraid. He had always been afraid of Astrid, that's what attracted him to her in a sick sense. But this was different, he was treading on a very fragile thread, and any false stepâ€¦|there was no sort of recovery.

"Hiccup?" She asked when he had been silent for a full minute.

He swallowed hard. "A-A-Astridâ€¦|" He croaked, sounding like a prepubescent teen. He swallowed again and crouched next to her, sort of hiding. With a breath, everything came out in a rush. "I know what your answer was, and I'm not going to try and change that, but there is something very important I need to say anyway."

She pressed him to go on.

"Iâ€¦|" He pulled the box out of his coat and handed it to her. "I'm

sorry. For everything. I hope that this will stand as an apology, and also serve to note that we can still be friends, no matter what."

"But Hiccupâ€¦"

"Please, don't say anything. Just take the giftâ€¦I was going to give it to you the night I proposed." He pulled at his collar. "Anywayâ€¦I made it just for you, and I would hate to see it go to waste."

She opened the little box and held up the band in the warm light, letting the red of the fires glisten off the superb craftsmanship. "Hiccupâ€¦It's beautifulâ€¦" As she raised her head to thank him, she found him gone. Like his Nightfury, gone without a trace.

Then she spotted him, walking with his head down up to the front while Toothless pranced proudly. Nothing was said as Gobber wheeled a cart up to the boy. Everyone watched in curiosity as Hiccup wielded a sword, dented, and held it in front of his dragon. Toothless opened his mouth and a blindingly bright blue flame ignited. The metal glowed a fierce orange and the crowd looked in awe.

Hiccup brought the blade down on the edge of the fire place and started to pound it out with a hammer.

"Toothless is a Nightfury, the unholy offspring of lightning and death. At night, he's practically invisible as shadow like as he is. Originally, we classified him in the mystery class, because no one had ever seen one before. Now, he's in the striker class, as shown by his plasma blast that he has demonstrated. Nightfurys have the largest wing to body ratio which allow them to fly faster, longer, and higher than any known dragon. They are also capable of vertical liftoff. But they are the most rare species, Toothless being the only one in existence that we know of."

He raised the blade again and another explosion of fire amazed the crowd.

"Nightfurys are extremely intelligent and independent creatures. From experience, they can understand what you say to them and communicate accordingly. They are very expressive, showing how they feel by their eyes and ear flaps, and whether or not they growl. The way I managed to train Toothless was by knocking him out of the sky with a bola. If I hadn't injured him, he would have flown away, ignoring me completely, but because he was trapped, he had no choice to except my aid."

Toothless laid his head on the warm stones and puffed heat onto the sword.

"He's loyal and a good friend. Just like me, he's unique, but unlike me, he's capable of taking down foes much larger than himself." He chuckled. To finish off the weapon, he submerged the scalding blade in water.

"It's not sharp because I don't have the grinder, but anyone want to survey my work?"

Blackmold stood, took the blade, and examined it. "It's excellent work!" He said in his booming voice. "I'll accept this as a gift, if

you sharpen it later." He winked.

Hiccup blushed and pulled at his collar. Toothless nudged him, slightly lifting him off the ground. Hiccup scratched his nose.

"Most importantly, Toothless is the best friend I've ever had, and he's the greatest thing that's ever happened to me."

Grins were on everyone's faces, and tears in some eyes.

Someone spoke up from the crowd, their face blending into the sea of people. "How do you allow a dragon to be your best friend?"

The black dragon understood the question and growled in the general direction of the voice, and protectively wrapped his tail around his owner.

"Does that answer that your question?" He smirked.

Stoick laughed. "Okay okay, break it up. I guess that's it then?"

"Actually, there's one more dragon to present." Hiccup sat down next to his dad, Toothless laying at his feet.

The chief watched in horror as the twins came up front with the zippleback.

"You let them go last?"

"Well, we were going by size, but then Snotlout wanted to go, and..."

"Never mind, I don't want to hear any excuses." Stoick held up a hand.

"They'll be fine. There's nothing for you to worry about." Hiccup shrugged.

"But you do." The chief said stoically, looking to Darla.

Hiccup gulped.

"Why don't you go get it over with? I'll take care of these two."

The boy sighed and stood.

Ruffnut and Tuffnut were starting, nervousness rolling off in waves. The only time they were in front of the crowd like this was when they destroyed something. Even then, they would just run away laughing. Tuffnut spoke robotically. "Hello, my name is Tuffnut, this is my sister Ruffnut, and this is our Zippleback, this head is Barf, and this head is Belch."

Stoick put his hand on his head. This couldn't end well.

Hiccup tapped Darla on the shoulder and then whispered. "Would you like to come on a walk with me?"

The ogre rolled her eyes but stood up, none the less. The two made their way outside.

Out in the cold, Hiccup and Darla walked side by side in painfully awkward silence. He was shaking, but he was unsure if it was from the cold or fear. He cracked his neck and looked at her.

"I know we haven't known each other long..."

"I'm going to stop you right there, Tiny."

Tiny?

"I know why your father sent for me, and frankly, I'm offended."

"What?"

"So Stoick thinks I won't be able to get a husband by myself. Okay, so maybe I'm eligible, extremely eligible, but that doesn't mean I need his help."

"Now, wait..."

"Shut it." She snapped. "Hiccup, you're a nice boy. You're kind, smart, but lets face it, we're not going to work. I need a man. A real man, and frankly, you're just a little boy. You're immature and imaginative. You claimed that your best friend was a dragon! What does it say about you if the only thing you relate to is a heartless lizard?"

"Hey!"

"Not done. You're tiny, scrawny, weak, a...all over pathetic excuse for a man. I need someone who can protect me, not a one-legged ninety-pound wimp incapable of taking care of himself."

Hiccup stood silent and slack jawed.

"My point is, no, I will not marry you. No, we can't be friends." She placed a comforting, huge hand on his shoulder. "I know rejection Hiccup. I've only been here one day, and I've never seen so many glances of pity and scorn than I've seen here, directed at you, behind your back. No one wants you as a husband, no one wants you as a chief."

Hiccup's lips trembled as he fought to speak. His eyes narrowed in anger. "How would you know?"

"Think of it like this: if you were a big burly viking, would you want the smallest of the tribe as the leader? Or the largest?"

He hated to admit it, but she was right. Oh how she was right!

"They only tolerate you because you're the chief's kid. Trust me, I know."

With that, the ugly girl left him to his misery. Hiccup's feet were frozen to the ground.

Hiccup had the brain of a genius, by no stretch of the imagination was he stupid. Foolish, true sometimes. His mind was analytical, organized, compartmentalized. Things always had their place. Such was the segment for insults and abuse. It was a quintessential iron cage, back in the far reaches of his mind. Every screw up and painful memory was stashed away, presumed to be forgotten. But Hiccup never forgot. He couldn't, not a word. While his entire life, he had brunt punches to the arm, shouts of stupidity; never once did he cave. Never did he let them bother him.

Until this evening. What Darla had said had been the breaking point. The iron walls burst and a flood of memories washed over him. He felt anger, heartache, betrayal, and even a touch of hate. The emotions trapped inside his heart burned passionately, like the smelted iron ore he poured at the forge. This night, something developed inside of Hiccup that no one could expect or understand.

On the outside, Hiccup's cheeks colored and his mouth set into a firm line. He stood up straight, straighter than ever before. He would not back down, not anymore.

Calmly, he walked back into the great hall, only a few minutes behind Darla.

As the doors opened, he was brought back to reality when a huge fireball ignited and stunned the crowd. Ruffnut swung a shank forward and chicken flambé went soaring through the air like a great meteor before landing perfectly on Blackmold's plate. It looked good enough, smelled divine, so without knowing any information on the twins and their reputation, he pulled off the wing and bit into it.

"The Zippleback chickenâ€|" He stood, holding up the meat. "Truly is delicious!"

The twins howled in success before head butting each other, clanging their helmets together.

Seeing the presentation over, Hiccup stepped over to the table. To his dismay, Stoick stood and put an arm around his son.

"My friends, I have an announcement!"

Immediately, Astrid caught the look on her friend's face and realized something was very wrong. That wasn't the face of embarrassment, it was rage. And she had never seen it on his face before. Toothless sat up as he could _feel_ it.

"My son is engaged!" Stoick shouted. The crowd burst into cheers in congratulations.

"She said no." Hiccup spoke, naught above a whisper.

He heard it thought. "What? What did you say?"

He broke from his father's grasp. "SHE SAID NO!" He screamed.

The hall went silent in awkwardness.

"She didn't even give me a chance, she cut me off!" He noticed the

looks he was getting from his father and the Gaul visitors and choose his words carefully. "Iâ€|she said we would be a bad match. I-I don't deserve her." The lies fell like acid from his lips.

Stoick still didn't notice his son's changed state. "It's okay, we'll find you another bride..."

"NO!" He grabbed a plate from the table and hurled it to the ground in an uncharacteristic temper tantrum.

"Settle down laddieâ€|" Gobber came and placed his arm around his shoulder. "It'll be alrightâ€|"

"Don't touch me!" The teen slipped from the viking's grasp and backed away until he was by the door. All eyes were on him. "Don't you see? No girl will take me as a husband. No citizen wants me as a chief! I don't understand why everyone keeps pretending like I'm normal! I've never been normal! It took me losing my leg and killing a dragon to get some recognition around here! Before that, I was the screw up! But you know what? I'm still Hiccup, and I'm still being treated like the runt I am! But at the same time, you keep putting all these hopeless responsibilities on my shoulders, and it's tearing me apart!"

He turned and looked at everyone he had ever known. "I don't belong here. I never have. I trained a dragon, a Nightfury of all! I created a tail based on lift, drag, weight, and thrust, by studying continuum flow fields characterized by properties of velocity, pressure, density and temperature. Everything I just said has never been thought of before, but it's the reason why dragons can fly, and I discovered it! So what does that get me? Outcasted as a consort with the 'enemy'! No one believed in me! Not until I killed a dragon! I had to fulfill tradition, as much as you all deny it, that's the only way I was accepted!"

As hard as he fought, he found his jaw trembling and tears pricking at his eyes.

"Darla was right, it says a lot about me that the only thing that relates to me is a dragon. Toothless is the only one who excepted me for who I am. And it all makes sense now. No one wants a tiny, scrawny, weak, one-legged, ninety-pound wimp incapable of taking care of himself around." He quoted Darla's harsh words.

His eyes jumped across the faces until he saw a familiar blonde in the back. She had a hand covering her mouth; Hiccup thought she was laughing. "AND YOU! Astrid! I asked you first, because I trusted you! I thought you finally understood my point of view. I-I love you, Astrid. I always have. You're beautiful, kind, and caring, but you're also brave, strong, and intimidatingâ€|everything I ever wanted to be. I thought that you of all people would understand what I was going through. But I guess I was wrong."

Then he addressed the crowd again. "If admitting all of this makes me weak, then who cares? Because I don't. I'm always weak. So I'll save you all the pain."

He finished his speech, looking right at his father. "I secede from the Hooligan tribe. Find yourself a new heir."

With that, he pulled the great doors open and disappeared into the night. An arctic wind burst in as the flames in the hall went out.

5. Desperation

Astrid stared dismally at the oak doors. They were more than just a barrier to the cold, they were a barrier to her best friend. How did things come to this?

The black dragon solemnly scratched at the panels to go out.

"Toothless!" Astrid called.

He saw her sadness and understood that his master needed to be alone. He sauntered over to the blonde and placed his head in her lap. She scratched his head as he crooned. "It'll be okay, Toothless. We'll straighten everything out." She hoped.

"So, this is your fault." A voice claimed. Toothless hissed and raised his tail to attack.

Astrid simply glanced up at the intruder. "How's it my fault? I had no idea that he!" As she spoke, she felt the ring on her fourth finger. She was right. "Well, I didn't know he would take it so harsh. And I'm not the only one at fault. You said that his friendship with Toothless was bad. But Toothless is the greatest friend anyone could have. I wish I had found him first." She continued to pet the dragon in an attempt to calm him down.

"Well, if you hadn't been so selfish, I wouldn't have even had to be involved."

"Me selfish? EXCUSE ME!?" Astrid stood, menacingly.

"Yeah. He asked you first, you should have just said yes."

"Listen missy, I've been close with Hiccup since he trained Toothless. I've known him my whole life. If there's something I know about him, it's that he's always calm and he doesn't care about his size. He always does his best! What he said tonight, that was not him talking. Someone put those ideas in his head. And I tend to believe it was you."

"I just told the truth, if he couldn't handle it, that's his own fault."

Darla suddenly found herself on her back, blood dripping from her nose. Astrid stood over her, looking like a spawn from Jotunheim. "You broke him, and for that, I will never forgive you."

The troll was forgotten as Astrid headed to the door. "Come on Toothless, let's see if we can comfort our friend."

The dragon perked up in the thought of his rider and the two went out together. Astrid first checked the Haddock home, but finding it empty, she supposed he would choose a place more sequestered. With the pale glow coming from the forge, the young viking trotted over and

knocked at the main door. No answer. Dissatisfied, she hopped the counter and went inside. The forge was empty, only weapons and fires inside. She then remembered the back room filled with Hiccup's sketches. Her suspicions were confirmed when she saw the door to the room shut, as it almost never was.

She knocked. "Hiccup? Pleaseâ€¦I know you're in there. Please, just let me in. Let's talk this out. I didn't know you felt so stronglyâ€¦Hiccup, I thought it was just an obligation. I would never have said those things if I had known."

There was still no reply. "Hiccup?" She gulped. His speech ran through her head, making her grow cold.

"_If admitting all of this makes me weak, then who cares? Because I don't. I'm always weak. So I'll save you all the pain._" He couldn't haveâ€¦| "_Find yourself a new heir_."

"Hiccup, for Thor's sake, answer me!"

Still no reply. Fear rising in her blood, she gripped the handle and tugged, luckily finding it unlocked. "HICCUP!"

Empty.

A lit candle sat at his desk. He had been there, and not too long ago. Astrid looked over the contents of the desk and saw one of Toothless' tails. This one looked different from the othersâ€¦it had gears on it, and no rods or ropes. Then she noticed there was a note next to it.

_Gobber, _

_This is a tail I made for Toothless a while ago that he can use without a rider. I don't want my absence to be a burden for him. I have left instructions to attach it. Please take care of him. He won't understandâ€¦no one will. _

Hiccup

Astrid ran back to the great hall, note in hand.

As I had said before, Hiccup was incredibly smart, but could be foolish on occasion. Such as now. Logic and reasoning had gone out the door and he was fulling riding on raw emotions he was unused to. Under the cover of night and fog, Hiccup stole away on a old rickety dingy. He took no provisions or supplies, and he left his leg on shore. His goal; to paddle as far away from Berk as possible. If he was lucky, he would drift right off the edge of the earth. Yes, Hiccup was done.

He paddled with the tides, riding the current as long as possible. He knew he would get tired, but he just needed to get far enough away where no one would find him.

Hiccup rubbed his eyes as the fresh tears continued to fall. "Stop cryingâ€¦|" He told himself. "It's not going to do any good."

Anyway, he pulled the paddle into the boat and rested his head on his knee. The teen allowed himself to cry, to just let out the anguish he

felt. No one could see him, no one would judge. The drops of his salty tears soaked into the fabric on his pants.

When he raised his eyes, blurry lights were dancing in the water. He swiped his cheeks and leaned over the surface. Upon further discovery, he found tiny sea dragons, similar to the Fireworms, but under water. They glowed brightly; blues, greens, and even purples. It was calming. He gently dipped his finger in the glasslike surface, sending ripples. The dragons gathered at his finger, examining it. None bit or attacked, but swam against his skin. Hiccup rested his head on the wooden edge of the boat and allowed the little dragons to nip at his fingers.

In the silence, an old lullaby tugged at his lips. Without much thought, the words rolled off his tongue.

_Swimming goes thy shadow, _

in the dark, dawn of the morning.

We steal away into the night,

Onward, without warning.

_Left behind thine homeland, _

So dauntless and bright.

Here onto never,

We swim in the dark delightâ€|

Our pathways are hiding,

in the dark dawn of the morning.

There is nothing to guide us,

Onward, without warning.

Forget all thy burdens,

Travel all through the night.

Whatever lies before us,

We will be alrightâ€|

The boy was soon asleep, the boat continued into silence.

â€"

"Hiccup?" There was a knock at the door. "Please, I know you're in there. Please, just let me in. Let's talk this out. I didn't know you felt so stronglyâ€|Hiccup, I thought it was just an obligation. I would never have said those things if I had known..."

He sat up. The faint light of the flickering candle only illuminated his desk. He wiped his tears, but said nothing. He didn't want to

Speak to anyone.

"Hiccup?" The door creaked open as his favorite blonde entered. "Hey," She spoke softly, closing the door behind her.

He looked away in shame, but she approached him.

"You have nothing to be ashamed of, Hiccup. You stood up for yourself, that takes unmeasurable strength to do." She leaned over him, bracing her knees on the chair on which he sat. "You needn't shed any tears." She dusted her fingers over his freckled cheeks.

He spared a smile for her. Even in this dream world, he could see her crystal clear. Her sky blue eyes, golden hair, radiant smile. She was perfect to him, and that's all that ever mattered.

"Thank you Astrid." He whispered.

Closer still she came. Her arms around his neck, fingers laced to crown. Cheek to cheek, she held him in the dim room. He, however, couldn't find the strength to return the embrace. "Will they forgive me?"

"I do." She confirmed.

As if to prove her words, Astrid pressed her lips to his. This was different from the previous embraces they had. This one was deeper, more passionate. There was an unspoken feeling between them, and Hiccup couldn't help but smile in realization of what it was.

She loves me.

SPISH.

Hiccup blinked his eyes open to see the vastness of blue sky stretching out in front of him. So, it was just a dream. Astrid hadn't come after him, no one had. He had enough time to slip into the forge, and leave a note without anyone noticing. This lonely thought veiled over his mind as he stared into the sky. The sound of the boat coming to a halt had woken him. Should he move it? Or should he just lie here and wait to starve to death? He sighed and sat up, at least he would figure out where he was.

Before he had the chance to observe his surroundings, a hand clapped over his mouth and dragged him out of the boat. He struggled, but was no match for the burly man holding him. Something sharp pricked his neck and soon he was out again.

Blindingly bright light. White space. Blood pulsing in his ears. Whispers. Hiccup attempted to breathe, but nothing happened. He couldn't breathe, he couldn't remember how to breathe. Only the sounds of choking and groping for air could be heard from his mouth. He stared deep into the abyss.

So is this how I die? Did I reach the end of the world?

Everything seemed heavy to him, like thousands of pounds of rock sat upon him. No, this wasn't right, this had to be a dream. It had to be. He willed his eyes shut, opened his mouth wide, and let the air

flow.

There was a shout, but it was more like a gurgle. He tried again, and this time more of scream came out. Whatever had paralyzed his throat had now passed and he breathed furiously, trying to suck in as much air as possible. He was awake finally, but his vision was blurred and cotton was in his ears. His mind was spinning as warbled voices spoke. Maybe not to him, but near him. Hiccup was still pinned to the ground, not by any physical thing, but just by the inability to move.

"â€|just getting out of the sense phase. Should be able to hear soon." A man said.

Hiccup rapidly blinked his eyes. Things were still blurred, but he could make out the general setting. He was in a cage, wooden. He laid on his back on the floor. By the sensations he was feeling, he had been stripped of his clothes. Other than that, everything was accounted for. His limbs, his hair, everything checked out. He was exhausted, yet felt like he hadn't moved in ages. His good leg was cramping, a pin prick feeling to his foot. Beads of sweat collected on his skin and he could smell the odor rolling off of him. His eyes watered as sight had yet to be restored him, while his lids were caked with crud. His nose ached, dry from heavy breathing. Chapped lips cracked apart.

He tried to speak yet again, to ask where he was. Instead, a gurgle came out as he foamed at the mouth like a wild dog.

Very attractive, to say the least.

"Aw there 'e is!" A gruff voice spoke in a condescending tone. "The little scamps up! Only took two days, not bad! That Nadder venom is sure a bitch, huh? Ya know, normally if you just prick yourself with them, you get the dry heaves. But this stuff? WHHO! Just that concentrated dose in your neck and your good as dead."

Hiccup breathed asthmatically.

"Yeah, you wouldn't be able to talk much yet for awhile. And once you start movin' then it'll really suck! There's a bucket on your left, when you have to vomit."

Hiccup started to see the man more clearly, a stranger. Older man, scruffy, eye patch, looked a bit like a pirate.

"Betcha wonderin' where ya are. Welp, you washed up on the wrong island boy! Welcome to the Outcasts!"

Hiccup's eyes grew wide in fear. If he was on Outcast island, it would only be a matter of time before he was brought in front of Alvin. He would refuse to help the tribe leader of course, but then it was inevitable that he would have a long, slow, and painful death by his hand.

"Well," The scruffy man added. "We're the Outcast Atolls. See, Outcast island is for the guys that have been cast out or ran away for one reason or another. They pillage other countries and slowly get wives and children. The people of this island are affiliated with the Outcasts but aren't actually apart of the tribe." He scratched

his chin, "mostly older men, who become farmers, women, and children. The safe part of the Outcasts."

That was relieving. Still, hopefully no one would recognize him here. Now that he knew where he was, he just had to find out why.

"Why-...?" Is all he could get out before his body seized up and he lunged for the bucket. He emptied the little bit his stomach held.

"Lars, are you talkin' to the new kid?" Another voice called.

"Yeah, makes them recover faster."

"What are you tellin' him?"

"Just where he is!"

"He should know where he is! If his boat washed up, he must have been aimin' for us!"

The man named Lars waved off the other voice with a 'bah!' And then looked back to Hiccup.

The boy had somewhat recovered, sitting up, but still extremely nauseous. He blinked a few times, a soft delirium still draped on his mind.

"Can you hear me?" The man asked, more stern.

Hiccup nodded.

"Answer with words."

"Yesâ€¦I can hear you." His voice was raw.

"Inga!" Lars shouted. "He's ready."

"Bring him over!"

The wooden cage door creaked open and the scruffy man came in. He wasn't huge, but still large enough to pick up Hiccupâ€¦if he wanted to. "Stand up."

The teen struggled as the room swayed. Only having one leg made it difficult to stand, but he gripped the bars to pull himself up. Apparently he was taking too long as Lars grabbed his arm and yanked him up.

The man surveyed his leg. "You're recent to amputation, aren't you?"

"About a year."

"And every day feels like the first." He rolled his eyes. "Heard it before. How'd you lose it? You seem pretty young for a viking battle wound."

"Dragon." Hiccup shrugged.

"Aye." The man said.

Hiccup was led, gripped by the shoulder, to a wooden table with hinges. A very angry looking woman (if you could call her that) stood with her arms crossed looking him over. At this point, Hiccup was painfully aware of his surroundings and the fact that he was naked. He felt small, and he tensed at the woman's glance.

"This is the new one." It was a question, but sounded like a statement.

"Yeah, tiny thing isn't he?"

She snorted. "Put him on the table."

Hiccup felt awkward having them speak like he wasn't in the room. On the table, they strapped him down with leather rope. As if he was going anywhere.

The woman had a thick book in her arms with a quill. "Age?"

"Uh, almost 16." Hiccup answered.

"Height?"

"4'10"

"Weight?"

"90 pounds."

She raised her eyebrow. "Do you suffer with any problems with your heart, breathing, or back and joints?"

"No, I'm okay."

"Any diseases?"

"I'm clean."

"Any loss of limbs or senses?" She glanced down. "Besides your leg?"

"No, ma'am."

"Ever suffer from pox, leprosy, or dysentery?"

"I had pox as a child"

She scribbled some stuff down. "Have you been isolated to one area, or do you travel?"

"I travel."

"Martial status?"

"Single."

"Any sexual experience?"

He blushed. "No."

"Any idea if you are fertile?"

He blushed harder. "No idea..."

"Are you trained to fight?"

"I am, but I'm not any good."

"Can you cook, clean, mend and other house hold work?"

"Yes."

"Can you farm and do field work?"

"I can, but I'm slow."

More writing. "Do you have any skill sets in trade?"

"I apprenticed for a blacksmith, and I am proficient in leather craft."

Her lips quirked in a morbid smile. "Education?"

"Full. I can read and write."

"Last question, how are you with dragons?"

The boy under question decided it would be an opportune time to tell a half-baked lie. "I can manage with them. Killed one, and he took my leg."

She nodded and wrote some information. Strangely, she never asked his name or where he was from.

"Alright, you can begin the examination." She told someone else. This second man looked closely at Hiccup, narrowing his eyes as he scanned the boy's body. He removed different straps and had him flex muscles while he held down the limb, a test of strength. He scoffed at invisible marks and flaws. The man was thorough with his examination, going as far as judging his genitals, making Hiccup tense and even more uncomfortable then he imagined he could be.

The man finally finished scrutinizing him and took the book. "He's a home type. He'll need a ten inch prosthetic if he gets out."

"Only a home type? But he has blacksmithing skills."

"Let his master be the one to decide what use that is." Then he looked to the man called Lars. "Clean him up."

Hiccup decided to take this opportunity to ask the question in his head. "Excuse me, what about my name?"

The woman raised an eyebrow. "Ah," she glanced at the book. "Wart."

"What? No, my name is-â€|"

"We don't care what your name was in the past, nor who you were or where you came from. You could have been the Roman Emperors' son, but we could care less. You're Wart now, welcome to the Thrall."

Hiccup's blood went cold. The Thrall, that explained everything. He was suddenly very full of regret of leaving home, especially with what the future held now.

Slaveryâ€|

He had heard of it. Some of the places he visited had it. But Stoick had never seen a use for slaves, and he didn't think it was morally right. Because of this, Hiccup had never put a lot of thought into them. But nowâ€|

"No." His mouth blurted.

The main trader's eyebrows raised in surprise. "No? You think you have a choice?"

Hiccup was feeling brave. "I'm the son of a chief, I won't be sold as a slave."

A sharp sting shot against his cheek as the man backhanded him. "You should have thought of that before running away!"

"How did you know that I ran away?"

"Why would a chief's son be exiled?" He hissed.

The table he was on suddenly tilted. A flap by his foot folded up to support his weight while a flap by his neck folded down to liberate his head. The three slave traders approached him with various blades, making him gulp in fear. Unable to fight against them, he clenched his eyes and waited. Thankfully, they were only shaving him. Yet again, they surprised him by being thorough, removing hair not only from his head, but his arms, legs, and everywhere else on his body.

"Lars, mark him." The head man ordered.

Hiccup kept his eyes shut.

A sharp pain pricked his chest and his eyes shot open. The man had a small knife and was making shallow, close cuts in Hiccup's breast. He worked fast but whatever this so called mark was, it was extensive and took up one side of his chest. As he worked, Inga took a long thin nail out of a case of embers and pierced his ear. He shouted as he heard his skin sizzle, but it didn't stop there. The metal was still soft and malleable. She bent it so it wrapped around his lobe, and then pierced him again, crossing the points so the tag was not easily removed.

By this time, Lars had finished his job and was rubbing ash into the cuts, making a tattoo. The remnant blood left over on his skin came into the mix and gave the mark a deep red color. Hiccup could only guess it was the Outcast insignia.

"How does he look?"

"Like the rest of them." The leader spoke. "A bit young for not being born into it."

"Do you think he's in exile?"

"Runaway. You know how kids are these days."

They acted like he wasn't there or he was some sort of animal. Hiccup reasoned, he basically was now.

"How much do you think he's worth?" Asked Lars.

"I wouldn't put more than a yak on him, if he gets sold."

"Worst comes to worst, we can make him a pleasure slave."

Inga snorted. "Right."

Hiccup physically shrunk away as the thought of some strange woman crawling all over him, touching him, and doing things made his skin crawl.

Lars handed him a bowl of cold broth and a chunk of lembas bread. "You haven't eaten in a while. Can't have a skimpy product."

He excepted it gratefully and devoured it with relish.

The leader looked him in the eye, narrowing his own, "Obviously you have no idea how this works. So here's a quick run down. Don't speak unless spoken to, and if you have something to say, bow low at the waist before addressing your master. They reserve the right to punish you however they want, whether it's physical, verbal, or emotional. You are to obey absolutely everything they ask. They also reserve the right to trade you back to us, and if that happens, you will be very, very sorry. Is that understood?"

His cheek throbbed as Hiccup fervently nodded, his voice gone.

Two days he spent in a cage with other slaves, curled in a small mass, hiding away. The others switched out on a daily basis. They were either bought or traded with older slaves. None of them acknowledged him. They were emotionless, inhuman. Hiccup watched them as they waited for the next master to purchase them, and then left. They were truly broken, and sheer trepidation over came him. He would not let that happen to him.

Finally, a old man with a cane approached the cage he was in. He scrutinized him, and then called over Lars. "What about this little one?"

"Ah that's Wart. No experience."

"What type?"

"He's a home type."

"Huh, a male home type! That's not so common. Oh, I see, he's handicapped." The man came closer. "Any skills?"

"Blacksmithing, and leather working. Though, I don't know how helpful that would be to you, Ragnar."

"Ah, he's for my wife." He hacked. "She's been harping me about getting her a helper."

Lars laughed. "I was wondering why you'd been been interested in him, since you have Mud."

Mud? Hiccup wondered.

"Best slave I've ever had. He's the equivalent of five men. Where did you get him?"

"Trade from a trade of a tradeâ€¦I don't know know his origins."

"Hmâ€¦" The old man looked back to Hiccup. "He's pretty young."

"You could get lots of time out of him."

The older man tilted his head and seemed to weigh it in his head. "How about two chickens and a sheep?"

"Make it three chickens and you have a deal."

Hiccup perked up in surprise as the door to the cage opened. "Wart. You're out of here."

The teen stood up and hopped out. Lars retrieved a prosthetic for him, and he put it on. It didn't fit like his old one, and it was wooden and rickety, but it worked.

The old man looked him over. "You'll work fine."

Hiccup remembered what the leader had told him and bowed low before speaking. "Thank you, sir."

He was guided over to a table where a transaction was taking place. "Alright, I have you down for three chickens and a sheep. Do you have your seal?"

The old man took out a small metal stamp and handed it to the man. Lars then stuck it in coals to heat it. As far as Hiccup knew, seals were made by heating the wax, not the stamp. But he didn't question his new masters. To his joy, Inga brought over a loin cloth and tied it around his waist for him. The boy smiled in thanks.

The seal was heated and picked up by a pair of tongs.

"Inga, hold him still, will you?" Lars asked.

Two large hands clamped down on his shoulders. The scalding metal crashed into his skin, just below his new tattoo, branding him. Hiccup winced as the man held it much too long. The teen grew dizzy from the pain, but refused to show any outwards evidence of it.

"You're all set, hope your wife likes her present."

"Aye, I hope so too!" The old man's grip was strong as he steered Hiccup along. "I won't put up with any shenanigans. Act up, and you will face the consequences. Is that understood?"

Hiccup bowed his head low. "Yes, sir."

"Good." Ragnar ushered the boy over to a waiting cart. A large man stood guard, a very large man.

"Wart, this is my other slave, Mud. He's as dumb as a mule, doesn't speak anything coherent, but he does what he's told and doesn't talk back. Hard worker, he is. Take notes."

Hiccup's eyes were wide as he stared at the giant before him. His size made Stoick look like a dwarf. It made sense why they called him Mud, as his skin was dark. Hiccup concluded that it matched a fine, rich leather more than Mud, but held his tongue. He had never seen someone with skin such a color before. The man's eyes were almost black, and three scars ran from his brow to the back of his head, only to be held shut by a metal strip. He also had a tattoo on his bulging chest, but of an unfamiliar tribe insignia. Under, dozens of brands decorated his chocolate skin. It was puzzling, if Mud was such a great slave, why had he been traded so many times?

"Mud, say hello to your new co-worker, Wart."

The large black man opened his mouth and a rich baritone belted out, "Hujambo."

The mystery was figured out, Mud didn't speak Norse.

Thankfully, Hiccup's best friend didn't speak it either.

6. Enslavement

Astrid sat cliff side, Stormfly to her right, and Toothless to her left, his head on her lap. It had been a week since Hiccup stormed out of the hall, and the two were hurting the most. Astrid could tell that Stoick felt bad too, but he hid his insecurities behind his duties of a chief. The Gauls had only left a few days prior, Darla not caring one bit. It was soon discovered that the condescending and pitiful looks that Hiccup was receiving were because of the troll towering over him.

After Hiccup left, Astrid spent the entire night searching the island. Toothless refused to let her sleep as he flew her everywhere. They searched the cove, beaches, caves, anywhere possible on Berk. After they turned up empty handed, Astrid enlisted the help of the rest of the academy to span the distance of the surrounding islands.

Hiccup was nowhere to be found.

Astrid scratched the dragon's muzzle as they sat on the cliff face. "It'll be okay, Toothless. We'll find him."

The Nightfury cooed in sadness, his eyes shut.

"If anything, he'll realize how big of a mistake it was to leave and come back himself." That was her sincere hope, but she didn't know how probable it was.

â€

The first week of Hiccup's capture was hectic. He was given to a crotchety old woman as a present. There was no appeasing her either. No matter how hard he worked on a order, she always found something to yell at him about. He worked long days, cleaning, cooking, mending, and any other meaningless chore she could fathom. He was soon wishing that the old man was his master instead.

Her name was Ælman, but Hiccup was required to call her 'Missus', as a sign of respect and subordination. She was heavy set and was unafraid to lay hands on him. His back was her favorite spot, too. She would either slap him bare handed, or with a strip of leather. If he made a sound, she would whip him again. The teen learned quickly to keep his mouth shut as much as possible.

Hiccup made quick friends with Mud. Well, as close as friends could be considered. The giant understood what the boy was saying, as his lips would quirk up in the smallest of smiles. Hiccup was thankful for the friendship too, since no one else was explaining how things worked, and he was just supposed to know what was going on. Mud couldn't so much explain as he could demonstrate. He also seemed to show a protective side to his little cohort, as he would steal food for him and command him to eat with the words, "Si njaa."

At night, they would traverse the long field and stay in a barn on the top of a hill. It was the housing unit to the neighboring slaves as well. To his observation, there was a older woman, two strong burly men, and two girls a few years older him, one of them seemingly pregnant. Animals stunk up the building.

His first few nights were sleepless as he curled up in a corner by himself. The others slept in a circle in the middle, surrounding a small fire, and protected by yaks and sheep. Mud was nowhere to be found on these nights.

Hiccup was homesick. His warm bed, the sound of Toothless crooning and his father snoring. He wondered what everyone was thinking. Did they care that he left? Were they thankful? To an extent, he believed that Stoick and Gobber may miss him, especially by their reactions to the incident of the Red Death. Toothless probably missed him, missed him as much as Hiccup missed him. Then there was Astrid. She had born the brunt of his anger that night. There was no telling how the girl felt. If he ever saw home, he would apologize. _If_ he got home.

It was three weeks into his enslavement when devastating winter set in. The field was buried under a foot of snow within a night. Adorned with only a loin cloth and a old horse blanket, Hiccup started the trek across the blizzard. He had only gotten to the first couple rows before a large hand snatched him up and lifted him into the air. It was Mud, wrapped in a blanket as well and old worn boots on his feet. "Si kufungia." He said smoothly. The giant dropped him of at the house and then disappeared.

Hiccup entered the house and strayed towards the fireplace, setting

wood and lighting the flint with shivering hands. Just as the flames stared to rise, the woman came down.

"Why is this house so cold? Why is the fire not started yet? Where's breakfast?"

Hiccup fanned the flames and then turned to bow to her. "I apologize. There was a blizzard over the night." He tried to explain.

"Never mind. No breakfast." She snapped at him.

He sighed, his stomach groaning since his dinner was revoked as well.

Ragnar came down as Hiccup began preparing porridge. "Ålman, please. It's not his fault it's cold. If anything it's your fault for waking up early."

"We need to be proactive, if we go easy on him, he'll walk all over us."

Ragnar rolled his eyes. "Sure, whatever you say. But let him eat. He needs to keep his weight up so he doesn't freeze during this weather."

"Fine!" She exasperated. "Wart, call Mud in too, I don't want him to freeze to death."

That was how Hiccup got away with eating as much as he wanted during the winter.

â€"

One month.

Still no sign of Hiccup on Berk or the surrounding islands. As painful as it had been, Astrid flew Stormfly down by the jagged rocks outside of Raven's point. They scoured the shores for any signs of cloth or body. Every day, she checked the shores, afraid to find anyone.

â€"

Hiccup found himself alone in his corner again. A draft came over and chilled him to the bone, despite his smelly blanket. He shook fervently before he heard the sound of someone from above. "Kijana."

He peeked out of his blanket to see Mud leaning over the hay loft. "Kuja hapa!"

Hiccup sat up and found the ladder to the hay loft. He climbed it, shivering. Up above, it was strangely warmer, since it was out of the draft. Mud was shifting the hay to make a hole, then he draped a blanket over it.

"What's this?" Hiccup wondered coming over.

The black man patted the spot, indicting him to sit. He did so, and Mud pushed him to lay down. The man covered him up to his chin with

the blanket he had been wearing, and then piled hay on top of him. To Hiccup's delight, the straw kept him insulated and trapped his heat.

"Thank you, Mud." Hiccup smiled sheepishly at the man.

In return, the man shook his head and said, "Sio Mud," then touched his heart and looked earnestly, "Mwaba."

"Mwaba?" Hiccup repeated.

"Mwaba," then he placed a large, warm hand on Hiccup's bald head. "Waat."

"Oh!" Mwaba was his name. Hiccup touched his own head and said, "Hiccup."

The large man smirked. "Kwikwi?"

That must have been his name in whatever language Mwaba spoke. Hiccup nodded. "You can call me Kwikwi." It sounded more pleasant than Wart. "What language is that?"

Mwaba looked confused, most likely not recognizing some words.

Hiccup rephrased his question. "I speak Norse, what do you speak?"

The man sat up proudly as he replied, "Kiswahili."

"So then you can understand me, you just can't speak it?"

Then man nodded. "Ndiyo."

"If I help you learn to actually pronounce words, would you teach me Kiswahili?"

Mwaba smiled like he had just been asked a stupid question. "Bila shaka!"

"I take that as a yes?" Hiccup half smiled.

The giant put his hand over the boy's eyes. "Lala." Sleep.

Devastating winter lasted long as the blizzard set in. Every early morning, Hiccup would rise with the sun and trek across the field with Mwaba to go to work. His days were consistent as he lit the fires, suffered abuse, made breakfast, suffered abuse, mended every hole, suffered abuse, cleaned every nook and cranny in the two-room long house, suffered abuse, entertained his mistress, and then trekked back to the barn to do it all over again in the morning.

â€

Five weeks.

Astrid spent three days in bed, heartsick. The dried bouquet of

flowers Hiccup had given her dangled above her head. Stormfly stayed perched by her window, worried about her rider.

â€

Whence returning to bed one night, Hiccup and Mwaba came to find a terror curled up in the straw, seeking shelter from the storm. Mwaba reached for it with his bare hands, a sour look on his face. "Walaani joka!" He hissed.

Hiccup stopped him, however, and approached the terror himself. "Don't, they're actually quite friendly."

The black man was intrigued as he took a seat in the hay. "Gani?"

"Watch," commanded Hiccup. He didn't have any food to pacify the lizard, but he would make it work. He placed a gentle hand on the beast's head and the terror jerked to wakefulness.

"Hey little guy!" Hiccup cooed.

The Terror hissed at the stranger, but Hiccup would not relent, as well was docile. The terror saw no threat and laid back down.

"Here, no harm done." He looked over to Mwaba. "Give me your hand."

The man did as asked, and watched as the boy placed his monstrous hand on the tiny reptile. The terror looked up at this new presence, and for a moment, the two just stared at each other. After what seemed like hours, the terror sauntered over and curled up in Mwaba's lap.

It was amusing, Hiccup thought, seeing this huge gruff man coddling this tiny lizard. "Give him a name."

The Zambian smiled. "Upepo."

â€

Two months.

Devastating winter waned into Tolerable winter. The blizzard moved on, leaving much damage to be repaired. Astrid and the rest of the academy had been taken away from their previous occupation and called to help on the buildings. As she worked, she kept her eyes peeled for the black dragon who had been elusive of late. She knew why, of course, he was out searching all day and night for his boy. Astrid was losing hope though, and had no idea how to tell Toothless that Hiccup would probably not be coming back.

â€

On the Outcast Atolls, Hiccup was perched on the roof, shivering and hammering shingles back into place. As metal met metal, Hiccup heard the sounds of hums coming from over the fields. He halted his work and listened. The slaves, including Mwaba, were singing.

Far over helheims' mountains cold

To dungeons deep, and caverns old
We must away ere break of day
To seek the freedom, and things been told.
Our ancestors, trapped alone in cells,
While hammers fell like ringing bells
In places deep, where dark things sleep,
In hollow halls beneath the fells.
For ancient lands, and frozen fjord,
There many a gleaming golden hoard
They shaped and wrought, and light they caught
To hide in gems on hilt of sword.
On silver necklaces they strung
The flowering stars, on crowns they hung
The dragon-fire, in twisted wire
They meshed the light of moon and sun.
Far over helheim's mountains cold
To dungeons deep and caverns old
We must away, ere break of day,
To claim the freedom, and things been told.
Goblets they carved there for themselves
And harps of gold; where no man delves
There lay they long, and many a song
Was sung unheard by men like ourselves.
The pines were roaring on the height,
The winds were moaning in the night.
The fire was red, it flaming spread;
The trees like torches blazed with light.
The bells were ringing in the dale
And men looked up with faces pale;
Then dragon's ire more fierce than fire

Laid low their towers and houses frail.
The mountain smoked beneath the moon;
The men, they heard the tramp of doom.
They fled their hall to dying fall
Loud with pain, and harsh with rune.
Far over helheims mountains grim
To dungeons deep and caverns dim
We must away, ere break of day,
_To win our freedom, so sing this hymn. _

"What do you think you're doing? Why aren't you working? This roof isn't going to repair itself!" The crazy old lady started ranting as she came outside.

"I apologize, missus." He offered no excuse as he continued his work.

A moment later, a Terror landed on Hiccup's shoulder. The boy called her Meriadoc, and she was the twin to Mwaba's Terror. The two dragons enjoyed the company of the workers, and were quickly loyal.

"What have you got?" Hiccup asked as the Terror dropped an apple into his lap. "Good girl." He scratched her head. Meriadoc had a unique talent for delivery and receiving. Some days, she was gone for long periods of time, but would bring back gifts for her master. The thought of sending messages by her to Berk went through his head, but fear plagued his mind and kept him from going through with his plan.

Mwaba came up to the house and climbed the ladder. "Jinsi ni kwenda?"

"Oh, it's going good." He tossed the apple to him. "This is for you, I had a nice lunch." A couple crackers and water, but he didn't eat much now, so it was filling. Mwaba was so much larger, he needed to eat more. "Can you hand me that _nyundo_?" He was getting better at his vocabulary.

Mwaba tossed a hammer in reply.

"What's going on out here? Why aren't you working? You lazy stupid fool!" The mistress called again from inside the house.

Hiccup rolled his eyes and muttered. "Iwapo hukutana, ifanye hucusikia." A phrase that Mwaba often said after foul things were spoken, a reminder to ignore it.

Mwaba patted the boy's back in sympathy, and then responded in a thick accent, very broken norse. "Ya. Ita aright."

Hiccup's head snapped over to look at the black man. Those had been

the first Norse words he had said, that weren't loan words. The teen smiled at him proudly.

â€

Three months.

Astrid approached the main hall as she was beckoned. Inside, Stoick stood up front with Gobber at his side. Spitelout and other heads of the tribe were also gathered. Astrid looked between the men, not exactly sure what was happening.

"Astrid," The chief spoke as he approached her. "How are you doing?"

She smiled sheepishly. "I've been better, sir."

"I can see it. You miss him."

She looked down in shame, "I also feel like it was my fault." Her voice was soft.

Stoick clapped her forearms. "We all feel that way. And we all miss him. But, there's no sign of him, and just wishing him back isn't going to make any difference."

"I've looked everywhere! I've tried everything! I don't know what else to do!"

Stoick held up a hand to silence her.

"He obviously doesn't want to be found, where ever he has gone. I've sent out messages to nearby tribes, and no one has seen him. So, next we wait."

"Wait?" she asked dismally.

"There's nothing else we can do."

She wanted to argue. She wanted to say that there was still lots of things they could do, but he was right. Their search had come to a dead end. "Are you giving up on him?"

Stoick looked put off by her comment. "Absolutely not. He's my son. He will come home, some day." Then he pursed his lips. "Astrid, as chief, I am often faced with a difficult decision. Hiccupâ€|he doesn't have any family besides me. And, if I were to goâ€|well, there would be no chief."

Astrid's throat constricted painfully as she realized what was being said.

"Hiccup loved you, he trusted you. And if he had married you, that would have put you in line for the chieftain if he had suddenly passed away."

"So, you're sayingâ€|"

"If something happens to me before Hiccup gets back, the tribe looks to you."

She covered her mouth. "But what about Snotlout? They're cousins!"

Spitelout rolled his eyes. "You want him as chief?"

Astrid held back a grin as his own father spoke of his incompetence.

"I'll train you, as I've been training Hiccup, and Gobber can help you as well. But, above all, this is just a precaution, I have faith that Hiccup will return to us before that happens."

She smiled proudly. "I won't let you down, sir."

Stoick surprised her by enveloping her in a hug. "Don't be mad at yourself, Astrid. Everything will be okay."

Just hearing the reassurance from the chief raised her hope and she returned the embrace.

"Thank you."

â€"

Hiccup slept soundly. It was always difficult for him to fall asleep. His aching muscles and agonizing thoughts kept him awake. But eventually, he would listen for Mwaba's breathing as he slept a few feet away. The sound was akin to Toothless' crooning, and aided to soothe the heartache. It was late one night when Hiccup was aroused by the sound of moaning. Naturally a light sleeper, he waved it off as one of the others having a boisterous nightmare. Then the groaning became louder and soon changed to screams. Hiccup was up and leaned over the loft.

In the dim light of the embers, he saw the pregnant girl was going into labor. The other slaves feigned sleep, as no one could actually sleep through the racket she was making. No one helped her. The teen had a very important decision to make. Once upon a time, before he apprenticed for Gobber, Stoick thought of the great idea to have his son apprentice the village's midwife. The boy helped deliver three babies before being kicked out for almost dropping a child. So, he knew what to do, even if he was a bit rusty. Now, the real question was, did he want to get involved? No one was helping her. He never talked to the girl, so it wasn't as if he'd feel awkward around her later. If anything, he would lay awake all night feeling guilty. So the teen descended the ladder and went over to the girl.

"Hey, how are your contractions?"

She screamed at him in reply.

"Okay well, I'm going to take a look, if you don't mind." He tried to be polite. He gingerly lifted her skirts and saw right away the crown of the babies head. She must have been in labour for hours, silently lying in pain. "I need you to breathe for a minute. Calm down. I can see the crown, but you just need to relax."

Hiccup sensed a presence behind him and turned to see Mwaba.

"What do?" the man asked.

"I need you to get a bucket of water, a knife, and whatever you can find as far as rags and a blanket."

The man nodded and went quickly to his duties.

The girl started panting harshly as she let out a scream.

"Relax. You're doing great." Hiccup smiled.

"I know what I'm doing!" She shouted back.

He didn't take her comment personally, as she was obviously in distress. "You need to calm down and breathe for a few contractions, you don't want to tear anything."

"What makes you an expert?!" She hissed.

"I've delivered a few." He said sternly. "I'm trying to help you."

The girl shut her eyes and breathed deep for a few moments. Hiccup grabbed her hand in a comforting way.

"Alright, now push."

The young woman beared down and in a held breath, the sound of a crying baby filled everyone's ears. By this time, Mwaba was back with the requested items. Hiccup caught the infant and cut the umbilical cord.

"Congratulations, it's a beautiful boy!" The teen smiled at the mother. The baby's cries had not lasted long, and now he just made incoherent babbling.

She sneered at him in reply.

He cleared his throat. "Mwaba, could you start to clean him?"

The man silently took the babe and gently cleaned him with one of the rags.

Hiccup then looked back to the girl. "In a few moments you will be passing the placenta—" He started to explain.

"I know." Her eyebrows furrowed as she covered herself up. "This is my third child."

"Oh—" His throat felt thick. "I just thought you needed some help—"

"Why? Because I'm so young? You don't know anything about me." With that she turned on her side and covered herself with a blanket.

Hiccup turned back to the Zambian, who had just finished bathing the baby. The teen took him back and carefully tied the umbilical cord. Finally, he wrapped him in swaddling clothes and approached the mother. "He's ready, if you want to hold him."

"Why the hell would I want to do that?" She spoke without getting up.

"Oh, I don't know, maybe because he's your son?"

The teen reluctantly sat up and looked at him like she was speaking to a dense child. "You really don't know anything. I'm a pleasure slave. I get pregnant. But my master doesn't acknowledge the child. I learned that the first time around. All they end up being is a burden. This environment is unsafe for a baby, and eventually, they will die. I've learned to never give them a chance to live."

Hiccup unconsciously gripped the child closer to him. "You can'tâ€¦"

"And why not? It's my body. My child. I can do what I want."

The teen looked angrily at her. "This is a human being. An innocent child that has done nothing to deserve death. He doesn't even have the chance to refuse. You think that just because you brought him into the world, that gives you the right to throw him away? You carried this life with you for nine months, and you don't want him?" Everything that he said was tearing him up inside as he said it.

"No. I don't want him. If you think all that is true, then you can care for him, but I promise that you'll regret it." She turned back onto her side. "Now please, leave me alone."

He stood alone for a moment, the infant squirming in his grasp.

"Leat us go." Mwaba gripped his shoulder.

Up in the loft, the babe slept soundly against the teen's chest. Mwaba was reclined, but stared up at the ceiling. He had known what would happen, he had just hoped the boy wasn't going to get involved.

"This world is evil." Hiccup said quietly. "The masters are like poison, contaminating everything they touch."

"Jina lake ni nani?"

"His name?" Hiccup surveyed the child. What little hair he had was red and he had a stout face. "How aboutâ€¦Peregrin? Pippin for short."

The man raised his eyebrow.

"It's the name of a character in an old folk tale. The name means 'Traveller in strange places' because this place is strange, and I only hope his time here is brief, as if there was some way I could send him to a better place." He patted the child's scraggly hair. In only a few short hours, Hiccup decided that he really did care for the boy. He was unwanted, but did nothing to cause it. A trait that the teen carried as well. They had said that having a child changed one's life, but no one could prepare Hiccup for what he was to endure.

For weeks Hiccup carried the babe in a blanket, slung around his shoulder. In the mornings, he would feed the him yak milk with a spoon, since the girl still refused to have anything to do with the child. Then afterwards, he would continue his routine, only with an extra duty.

To Hiccup's relief, Pippin slept most of the day. When he roused, the teen would hobble back to the barn, feed him or clean him, and then hobble right back to work. I say hobble because Hiccup had finally reached his growth spurt. He was getting taller, but his prosthetic was too short. Anytime he stood, he would lean heavily to one side. He was also becoming stronger, he noticed. As Pippin grew, Hiccup was not burdened with the extra weight around his neck.

â€"

Three and a half months.

Things on Berk were returning back to normal. Dragon training continued, Astrid and Fishlegs leading the class. Thankfully, all of Hiccup's notes had been left behind, so they had something to reference.

The hardest part about the teen's absence is when the group went out flying and ran into Toothless.

No saddle. No rider. No emotion from the Nightfury. He would slip passed the teens and disappear. During the first month, he sought solace from Astrid and Stoick, but to him, it wasn't the same. No one was like the boy that had befriended him oh so long ago. He refused to believe that Hiccup was gone, and flew far and wide, searching everywhere imaginable for his boy.

Toothless wouldn't rest until Hiccup came home.

â€"

Pippin sat giggling, buzzing his lips, and blowing spit bubbles. Hiccup kept a neutral smile as he pulled the needle through the fabric he was fixing.

"So, you're a father now?"

The teen looked up quickly to see his mistress staring heavily at the child.

Hiccup patted the bundle against his chest and replied. "In a way. Yes, missus."

She narrowed her eyes, "You haven't even been here four months."

"This child was abandoned. I couldn't stand to see a innocent child go unloved, dying within a day. So I'm caring for him."

"How veryâ€|considerate of you." She replied. "Don't let it be a distraction. You are my slave first and foremost."

"Yes, missus." He nodded.

â€"

Four months.

Hiccup considered himself to be very mature and grown up for his age. He was expressive, but also very sarcastic. This all changed when Pippin came into his life. He would have never seen himself as one of those overly gushy, sentimental types. But never the less, he found himself cooing and babbling right back with the babe. He tickled and played with Pippin, almost as if he was his own child. Hiccup glanced over to see the calm, almost stoic giant grinning at him. "What?"

"I see upendo."

"I am unfamiliar with that phrase."

"How yoo sayâ€|love?"

Hiccup smiled. A month with this kid attached to his hip, anyone else would have been driven up the wall. But Pippin was not a burden as the girl had so vulgarly suggested. He had been a gift. The sweet bubbling innocence of the child had been a light in the dark and dreary world. Hiccup only wished he could shelter him forever.

"Do you want to hold him?"

The Zambian held out his large hands to receive the child. The bundle was big enough to fit in just one of his hands. He mimicked the way he had seen Hiccup holding him and observed the child.

"Wewe ni mzuri kidogo mtoto." The man grinned.

Suddenly, Pippin started to kick and choke out cries. Mwaba swiftly handed him back to the teen.

Hiccup took him with a laugh. "Don't have much experience with babies, do you?" He poked his finger into the babe's mouth as a pacifier. "There, it's okay. Daddy's here." As the words left his mouth, his cheeks reddened. Him, a father.

"Mo like modaâ€|" Mwaba smirked, teasing the boy.

â€"

Six months.

The house on the hill that was to be Hiccup's and Astrid's had finally been completed. After his disappearance, the construction had been stopped. But after a while, Astrid took up the project herself, needing a distraction. Hiccup had made a rough blueprint of the house, but it was apparent that he didn't care that much about it. Astrid wanted the house to be his, so she studied the space in his back room and his bedroom, and tried to mimic the feeling of both. Of course, she put her own spin on things, hoping that maybe she would share the home. Still, his presence was not there, and the house would never feel like home until it he was.

â€"

Pippin was unhappy, and that made Hiccup unhappy. The baby had been nonstop crying for hours. No matter what he tried, nothing pacified him. The sound of the child's unhappy tears hurt the teen, as he felt helpless. He continued to try to work as Pippin cried on.

"If that baby cries one more time, I'll ring it's neck!" The mistress screamed at the boy.

"Oh please," Hiccup was desperate. "I can't help his crying. I've tried everything! You must understand!"

"I understand, alright. But then again, what's the worth of this child?"

"Oh don't!" Hiccup clutched the bundle in his arms as the woman moved to strike it. "If you have to punish him, punish me instead. He's just a baby!" Pippin continued his squealing as the shouting around him mounted.

"Then you can decide which is more important, your life or his!" She shoved him so he fell backwards. Hiccup braced himself to protect the infant in his grasp. Her foot collided with his side and back as the babe cried on. He pulled Pippin close, hushing him as the blows kept crashing upon him. Screaming inundated him as his mind whirled with pain. He shut his eyes to block it out, but no matter how hard he willed it, the sounds would not stop.

"It's a burden! Let him die! Let it go!"

Hiccup's tense fingers poked uncomfortably into the baby, as his wailing persisted. Hiccup merely buried his face into his chest and held his breath.

His cries finally ceased as Hiccup's side was bloody and bruised. The child had cried himself to sleep. Hiccup was shaking as he knelt.

"I can't take it anymore!" His Mistress cried.

It was then that Ragnar choose to walk in. There was a sad sigh on his lips as he saw Hiccup, bloody on the floor, and his wife looking incredibly flustered.

"What is it, dear?"

"I hate him!" She shouted. "Take him back! Get someone else! He's worthless! All he cares about is that child!"

"Really? It's just for a little while longer. Wart's been a good servant for you!"

"No! He messes everything up! He's lazy and incompetent, and all over a pathetic excuse for a man!"

Hiccup silently exasperated, _Again? Really?!_

"We'll take care of him at the end of the week." The man sighed. He just hoped they would allow him to be traded for a new slave. "Wart, do you understand?"

Hiccup bowed low, the motion sending aches and pains all over. "Yes

sir." His voice was thick with sorrow.

"Get out." The woman spat.

"May I make a request?" He remained low.

"If you want to push your luck." She sneered.

"May I have a piece of parchment?"

"What for?"

"Please." He offered nothing else.

She took out a blank book from a shelf and roughly ripped out a sheet. "Take care of it, it is all you will get."

"Thank you ma'am."

That evening, he was silent as Mwaba watched him, judging him. Every scrap of rag and blanket that he could find was collected into a bundle. An old, unused fishing net was found in the depths of the barn. He gathered his supplies and wrapped Pippin protectively in rags, so that only his tiny face could be seen. Finally, he wrote out a note with piece of charcoal.

This is Peregrin. Pippin for short. His birth parents do not want him, so I cared for him. But, it is no longer safe for him here with me. Please take care of him.

Hiccup

He then attached the net and note to Meriadoc. Before he placed Pippin inside, he held him one last time. "Be good for them, okay? I love you."

Pippin's tiny hand reached out and grabbed his nose. The teen saw the necessity of his departure, but it was like looking at the necessity of death. In tears, he placed the bundle into the net and took the Terror outside. Hiccup raised the dragon up and pointed it in the direction of Berk. "Go, and be safe, please."

He watched as the child, his child, was carried away into the night. When they disappeared, the teen crumpled to the ground in horrendous sobs.

Many days and nights passed in silence and anxiety. Hiccup was distracted by his thoughts and was often yelled at, and occasionally slapped, by the woman. Did Meriadoc make it? Was Berk in a different direction? What if the net didn't hold up? What if, what if, what if? So many unanswered questions, but he could only pray that Pippin would be alright.

Finally, right before the week was up, Meriadoc returned to the barn, no net and no babe. A note was attached to her leg and Hiccup gingerly read it.

Hiccup

We received him. He'll be fine with us. Please, come home.

Love, Astrid

For the second time that week, Hiccup collapsed into a heap of sobs.

Rain. A torrent of darkness inside and outside. The only thing to quell the scorn was a large warm hand on a shoulder. Although, it was of little comfort, as this would be the last contact Hiccup and Mwaba would have. The teen watched as other slaves gathered in the square with the traders, assorted ages and skin tones.

Hiccup turned to the man, it was time to go. In his best Kiswahili, he said, "Umekuwa hivyo kusaidea kwangu. Ninathamini rafiki wetu, na mimi miss wewe. Kama milele kuwa huru, nenda kwa Berk. Nina marafiki huko."

Teary eyed and proud, Mwaba gripped his arms hard and returned in Norse. "Yoo have been de greatest friend I have had. I auso value yoo, even ef no one ese does. I wee miss yoo great."

Hiccup flung his arms around the giant in a sorrowful embrace. Just when he wasn't feeling so lonely, he was ripped apart again. Mwaba had come to know all about his past, as he had felt safe to confide in the man. He told of the Red Death and taming a Nightfury. He told of the academy and Astrid, and then of his runaway because of Darla. Mwaba had understood, but felt pity on the boy as he was thrust into the life of the thrall just because he had to marry someone dislikable.

Hiccup felt guilty. After all, he was here for, in the grand scheme of things, petty reasons. Mwaba had been sold from his family, and lived his entire life as a slave. And yet, he was still a joyful man. All this added up to Hiccup's respect for the giant.

But now, everything was changing again. Without another word, Hiccup limped over to the others followed by his Master.

Lars greeted them. "Ah, Ragnar! Good to see you! It's been sixth months, so your wife is enjoying her slave?"

"Actuallyâ€|no. We want to trade him for another home type, if you have one."

Lars physically deflated. "You know, six months isn't all that long to have a slaveâ€|what made her decide this?"

"Well, there were quite a few contributing factorsâ€|she said he was lazy, disrespectful, distracted, and messed things up."

"Oh Odinâ€|" Lars sighed. "Okay, we don't have any home types at the moment, but we can see about getting you a refund, or you can check back later?"

The two men continued business talk as a firm hand seized Hiccup's wrist. His head snapped over to meet the eyes of the head trader, looking very very angry. The threat from many months ago flashed in his mind.

"What are you going to do?" Hiccup tried to say with authority, but

it came out as a squeamish question.

The man just grit his teeth in anger. He would regret asking soon enough.

7. Tread Lightly

First few paragraphs are adapted from user JohnnyLee619.

* * *

><p>A flood of memory washes over him.<p>

A lonely boy betrayed and battered, contrives affection from a dragon, thinking it will be the only love he'll ever know. His spirit is in pieces, his heart, broken at the seams. He craves one drop of kindness. He curses the injustice and begs to know the reason why he suffers in this prison. His life is not of value, condemned to be forgotten. He swallows his rebellion, but there's a storm within his breast. He tries to quell the downpour, yet cannot tame his soul's contention.

A creak of a door. A guard. That was the shadow he had seen entering the area. The man carried a long staff with a small bucket at the end attached to it. Hiccup's throat began to tighten as it has sensed the aura of the element swinging in the bucket. Under the light of the moon, he could see the water sparkle right before his eyes.

Hiccup looked on from his hanging cage. Where was he? Oh yes, about twenty feet off the ground, in a tight iron cage dangling over sharp rocks and angry wild dragons by all but a rusty chain.

Much better than his previous engagement. The guard, on ground floor too low under Hiccup, lifted the staff as it came closer to the boy's cage. Slowly, and weakly, he gladly drank a small sip that the guard would allow.

This was their dinner.

Hiccup smiled upon the guard and gradually thanked the man for the refreshment. The man raised an eyebrow, finding it strange to show kindness in such low condition. As the man left to give the prisoners their "dinner," he began to wonder if the boy had either a good spirit, was a moron, or if he had finally lost it...

Hiccup was none of the above; because he had something else in mind.

"Pst, hey." A strange whisper was heard, and the boy looked around. It was a few seconds before he saw an old man looking at him. He too was caged. "Yeah, you, what's your name?" he asked.

Relieved that someone, for once, would accept sociality, he happily responded, "they call me Wart."

"What's with the smile?" he asked again, sneering at the boy.

The question itself had dragged the prisoners' curiosity, as well as the guard.

Hiccup chuckled, realizing that maybe he had been acting a little different than expected by the head trader. He had always been different, but this time for a good reason, "It's my son..." he began, now with everyone eyeing on him, "He was born here, born a slave, yet he was set free."

"H-How?" his prison mate shivered, wondering how in the world the boy did it.

"I can't tell, and it would never work for a man, not men of this evil place." He kept his mouth shut on his ability of dragon training. Who knows what on Midgard would they do to him if they know his hidden talent; especially the guard. If someone had leaked to Alvin...The prisoners, they would do whatever it took to get a single luxury, even revealing his secret to the head master for a small piece of bread would do the job. "It doesn't matter to me now. He's safe, away from this garbage, far up north where he's free and taken cared by...the people I trusted," he gulped at his last word. He hated to admit it, but somehow, the situation seemed different when it came to Pippin, he knew and would trust Berk with his life to raise his boy. "There is no leverage on me now," he laughed. Knowing this in his heart brought him joy that these bastards could never take away. It was impossible, they would be walking in enemy's territory and be blown to oblivion by Berk's dragons.

However, this didn't come as surprise to the brunet. The same question was already asked about him before...

When the head trader was punishing him.

Hiccup used the same answer before, and it infuriated the head trader, knowing that the boy had done something remarkable that no slaves has ever done before. He hated that, knowing that a puny slave had himself happiness that could not be taken away. He hated that, knowing that he was powerless...

Well, then it was done, and Hiccup was left with the other insubordinates to rot away.

The guard stared at Hiccup, as if he had no idea what to do to a person who was happy in life and knowing that suffering would not bring him down.

It seemed Hiccup had succeed in beating the system.

Everyone thought of the same thing, and they could only envy his strength.

For the first time, some would look up to him...

Still, despite the utter joy he felt in Pippin's freedom, he could only dread what was to come. Especially with what had preceded him.

Aching wrists, throbbing cheeks, stinging flesh from bloody wounds, his worst on his back, where he had been flogged. Hiccup leaned against the iron bars that held him, seeking relief for his temples against the cool metal. His victory was short lived as the traders came in the morning to review the prisoners. Eight were taken back to

the thrall, but little happy Hiccup, the bug that frustrated the head trader to no end, was raised another eighty feet in the air.

The head master trader had deemed him worth less to the thrall than was worth. It would be an inconvenience to them to keep him alive, so they put him to better use: as a dragon lure.

The boy looked over to some of the other cages containing skeletal remains of others.

"Hey, how's it going?"

No reply, obviously.

"It's a little chilly up here. When's lunch?"

He hadn't eaten in two days, thanks to his masters. He sighed and fell back, causing the cage to sway. It was relaxing, if he ignored the impending doom of his inevitable death and the freezing cold wind biting at his naked skin.

"A regular balmy vacation, if I do say myself."

He closed his eyes as the cage continued to sway. He could stay there all day, he really could, no one was coming to get him.

Suddenly, he heard a loud 'Chink' as the cage started to lower.

"Hello..." He peered down. He seemed to speak too soon as he saw huge men with distinct Viking helmets lowering the cage. This didn't look good exactly.

"Hurry up, before the traders come!" A strangely familiar voice called. He landed on the ground and immediately the door was pried open, Hiccup pulled out.

Dah-da-dah, he was examined again. They weren't so thorough as the traders, but mostly just surveying his wounds.

"He's a little worse for wear, but I think with a couple days of healing, he would be alright."

"What's your name boy?" A gruff voice spoke.

Hiccup looked up to the man speaking and his voice went dry in his throat.

The man that, for years, wanted nothing more than to leave waste to his home. The man that planted the Screaming Death under Berk, to destroy it from the bottom up. The same man who used an innocent girl to trick the academy and steal his life's work. The man his own father had banished from Berk for unforgivable crimes. The man he hated more than life itself. He was staring up to the one and only, spawn of Loki himself, Alvin the Treacherous.

"Uh...uh..." Hiccup just stuttered. There was no recognition in the man's eyes. Thankfully the boy had grown so much over the last six months, he looked different from the last time he had come face to face with the man. His hair was a bit shorter, and a bit of foliage

was filling in his chin. His added height and lack of clothing and dragon helped.

"Does he know how to speak?" Whispered another man. Alvin elbowed him and patiently waited for Hiccup to answer.

"Uh...Wart." He remembered his title (or absence of one) from the thrall, and stuck to it for safety.

"That was your slave name, what's your birth name?"

Hiccup gulped, but played his cards carefully. "I...I don't remember...I've been in it for so long." He acted choked up.

"Well, Wart will be fine then." He scratched his beard. "M'name is Alvin the Treacherous, most blood thirsty Viking in the archipelago."

Hiccup gulped. "Are you going to put me back into slavery?" He asked carefully.

Alvin clapped his back. "Slavery is such a strong word, I prefer servant hood. I need all my best men for fighting, and we don't allow women on the main island..."

"So, cooking, cleaning, and serving?"

"Exactly! Can you do that? If not, we can put you right back into the cage and feed you to the dragons." He laughed.

Oh, he didn't want that. "You're in luck, I'm a home type."

"Perfect. Let's get back to the base, we'll talk details." The Viking started to lead him away, when he realized he was hopping on one leg.

"Ah..." Alvin raised a quizzical eyebrow. "I can see why you're a home type. What happened?"

"Dragon wound." He shrugged.

A smile broke out on the man's face. "I surmise that you hate the creatures too, then."

"Uh...well, they are dragons, they'll do what they do. Sure, I'm mad that he bit off my leg..."

"Then you're going to like what we're doing." He called over another man. "Carry him."

Hiccup was caught in surprise as he was lifted and then put on a man's shoulder.

"Uh, Alvin?" The boy asked shyly.

"Speak up, boy! You're in the presence of Vikings, now!"

He cleared his throat. "Why me?"

The huge man laughed. "One man's trash is another man's treasure!"

Ouch.

He was put on a small sized boat and off they sailed to Outcast island. Hiccup sat in the back of the boat, shivering as the bigger men laughed and joked towards the front. It made sense, when he thought about it. Why go to a trader and get ripped off, when you could 'rescue' someone and have them indebted to you? Alvin was a smart man, being the chief and all, he probably enjoyed finding outcasts.

On the main island, Hiccup was taken to a small cave, acting as the healer's hut. There was little vegetation on the island, but lots of pockets for rooms. The man carrying him set him down on a bench and then addressed the healer. "Clean him up before dinner. Alvin's orders."

The healer was a frail old man, but he looked wise beyond comprehension. He wordlessly began to prepare salve for the wounds. Hiccup shivered in the damp cave, still bare to the elements. The man noticed and spoke, "We shall have proper clothing for you after you are bandaged. As for now, I'm afraid you must stay like this. Your wounds are too extensive."

Hiccup understood and laid down on his stomach to give the man access to the lacerations spanning from his neck to the back of his knees.

"You must have done something awfully bad to be punished like this."

"She said that I was disrespectful and lazy, and a bunch of other things that weren't true."

"The traders aren't known for their mercy. You are lucky you weren't killed."

"I almost was. They intended for me to rot up in a cage."

"And Alvin saved you. Quick way to save a couple chickens." He started to spread the salve. "But, there's not much to worry about now. He's getting you medical treatment. That should count for something."

"Still, he'll kill me somewhere down the line."

"Hmm, not necessarily. He needs as many men as he can get, so I'm sure you'll be safe. Just don't tell him you're from Berk."

Hiccup's eyes widened. "How did you know I was from Berk?"

The man stopped. "I didn't, I was making a joke."

CRAP.

"Eh, I don't care. I'm not prejudice."

Hiccup sighed as the man continued to work in silence.

Later, as dinner time rolled around, Hiccup was escorted to the dinning hall. He tried his hardest to conceal the happy grin on his face. It was the first time in six months that he wore clothes, actually warm, clean, and fitting clothes! He was also provided a peg leg, which was the appropriate height for him now that he had grown. He felt good, despite the fact that he was approaching a group of Outcasts.

A chair was drawn up for him by Alvin and he took a seat. Sheepishly, he scanned the food on the table, his mouth watering at the meat and bread. But he made no move to grab anything; he wasn't given permission.

"Wart, Wart, Wart, Wart, Wart, Wart, Wart." Alvin said turning to him. "No, that's too many Warts. Let's try that again. Wart, Wart, Wart. It's your first night with us, relax! Your job can start in the morning! Eat! You must be starving!"

Hiccup smiled gratefully and tore into a chicken leg. The men poured him a mug of mead and he gulped it down, regardless of the alcohol. It was almost comical; a scrawny boy, sitting around all these massive vikings with full beards, helmets and armor.

"So boy, where are you from?"

A long pause as Hiccup pondered the question. "I'm from the Atolls, like I said."

The man laughed. "That may have worked when I asked you your name, but you must get homesick. Remember home?"

Oh how he remembered, oh how he missed. The dragons, his friends, his family, even the sheep. Yes, Hiccup had a Berk sized hole in his heart as he craved to hear the sounds of the wind in the trees, the soaring gulls above, and the occasional swear of a viking almost losing a limb. Home.

"I'm from the Gaul tribe." He lied, to save his skin, of course.

"My, that's a distance south. What brought you up here?"

"Iâ€¦I ran away." He needn't lie anymore. "My father, for the sake of the tribe, thought it was best for me to get married. I had a girl I loved, very much soâ€¦"

Someone interrupted. "Was she pretty?"

Hiccup smiled. "Prettiest girl on the island! And she was my best friend. Butâ€¦she rejected my offer. Even when I offered her a substantial bride priceâ€¦she said she didn't want to marry me for obligation."

"So, your heart was broken." Alvin said in a mocking tone, as if to say, 'I bet you regretted that quickly.'

"Yes, I was heart broken, but that didn't keep my father from taking matters into his own hands."

Alvin smiled at this, raising an eyebrow in interest.

"He arranged a marriage by himself toâ€|wellâ€|Darla the Disagreeable."

A round of uproarious laughter laced with the tinniest hints of pity echoed throughout the room. Darla's rancid infamy proceeded her as the Gaul's were a very large profitable tribe. They travelled and traded with places as far north as the Outcasts, to lands so far south that the archipelago had never heard of. Of course, Blackmold always took his daughter with him on his travels, and Darla sure knew how to make an impression.

Alvin reigned over his jocular laughter and responded. "No wonder you ran away!"

"That's not even the worst part! I consented to it, but she wouldn't have it! She said she could do better!"

"Yeah, she could marry a deaf, dumb, blind, mute. I'm sure even then she'd have a hard time."

The men continued to laugh. "So are the rumors true? I heard that when she was being formed in the womb, Odin accidentally used yak feces instead of clay."

That was a new one. "I could believe that. As far as I can tell, she is the prime example of an appalling dump heap, overflowing with the most deplorable rubbish imaginable, mangled up in tangled up knots!" He exasperated.

The men were impressed. "That's some mighty fine vocabulary, you have there."

He blushed. "I don't know what came over meâ€|the spirit of disgust has a colorful tongue."

More laughter.

"I will say this." He stated firmly. "Vikings are supposed to be brutal, heartless, and cruel, but this girlâ€|oh, no one comes near her. Sheâ€|sheâ€|oh! Her ass must be jealous of the crap that comes out of her mouth!"

Someone fell out of their chair.

Hiccup breathed a sigh of relief. Things were looking up.

A large hand clapped hard against his back. "I like you!" Alvin shouted in joy. "You will sleep on a mat outside my door."

For a servant, that was a high honor. It just one day, he was favored heavily by the chief of the clan. Maybe, just maybe he would serve out the rest of his sentence in the approval of this man, and then be able to go home, scot free. He only needed to survive six years.

Hiccup resumed eating the chicken he had forgotten about when he went into his tirade.

Alvin spoke up. "Wart, while you are only a servant around here, I think it's only fair that we let you in on our plans."

"That's nice of you." He smirked.

"Have you heard of the isle of Berk?"

"Hmmâ€|vaguely. Isn't that the place where they live in peace with dragons, or something stupid like that?"

"Oh, you'll fit right in around here!" He chuckled. "The chief has this boy, Hiccup, tiny thing!"

"Tinier than me?"

"Oh yes, I conclude he's about four feet tall, and maybe 70 pounds."

It was alleviating to know that Alvin really hadn't paid too much attention to Hiccup's appearance. Hiccup played along. "What a runt!"

"And the worst part is, is that he learned how to train dragons, so they do whatever he asks. They call him the Dragon Conqueror."

"Dragon Conqueror? If he's controlling them, I would think he would go by Dragon _Whisperer_."

"So now Berk has this defense, and we can't get passed it to invade."

"Soâ€|?"

"If we can get Hiccup, then we can get him to train the dragons here, and then we can take over Berk!"

"Why would you want to take it over? Isn't it small?" He played dumb.

"Aye, the village is, but not the island. The island is huge and full of forest and plantsâ€|things we don't have here."

"Oh, so you want it for the resources." He hadn't actually known why Alvin had always wanted Berk. He had assumed it was just a stupid grudge. Vikings loved their grudge matches.

"Exactly! You have the resources, you trade, you get rich, and die a happy viking." Alvin burped as he finished his mug. "Now, there's a small problem."

"What?"

"The boy has been missing for a long time. Our spies haven't see him anywhere on the island."

Hiccup boiled an acute panic and wondered if Alvin would put two and two together. "Maybeâ€|he's on a rite of passage?"

"I don't know where he could be, because he left his dragon

behind."

"His dragon?"

"Yes," Alvin stated in a deep gruff voice. "A Nightfury! That little runt trained a Nightfury to follow him like a trained puppy!"

"That's pretty amazing."

"It's damn near insane! It just frustrates me how he did it! We have the book he wrote on it, every note about every type he's come across. We've even seen him train someone in it, and we still can't figure it out!"

Hiccup knew what the problem was right off the bat. They lacked compassion and were extremely threatening, two things that were imperative if training was going to happen. He said nothing though.

"We just need to wait until he comes back."

Bed time. The most wonderful feeling in the world. For you know, anyone who wasn't hiding their identity as they were outside the door of the viking with the longest kill streak. Hiccup was wide awake with trepidation, so many things could go wrong, and for him, they usually did. In this circumstance, he might just run his mouth too much and say something that would give everything away. He had to be more careful. Thankfully, Alvin's lack of knowledge gave him some peace, but he was still dangerously close to finding the truth. Most importantly, Berk would be safe from the Outcasts as long as he was here in hiding.

The next day, his job did start, but it was more pleasant than what he had been through. The Outcasts actually tolerated his slip ups, and they usually laughed. It was odd, all his life he was taught to be enemies with these people, taught that they were evil, right down to the core. But, as he went about his daily chores, he discovered that they weren't preparing for a raid, they were just keeping up with fighting.

That evening at dinner, he was the source of entertainment. He would be eating after everyone else, so he simply stood in the back of the room, ready to fetch whatever was required.

"Wart!" Alvin called waving his hand over.

The boy obediently came and stood next to him. "Yes, sir?"

"Know any jokes?"

Hiccup held a half grimace, half smirk. "Really stupid ones."

"Well, go on!"

Hiccup cleared his throat. "What does the god of thunder say after a long day of work?"

"What?" Alvin smiled.

He spoke with a voice, uncannily like his father. "I've been carrin' this hammer all day, and my arms are tho Thor!"

Alvin lost it, not expecting it in the least. "Another!"

"How does Odin like his mug?"

"How?"

"Bi-frosted."

More laughter. Hiccup was vaguely surprised, but soon wrote it off as an attribute of the mead they were each gulping down.

"How did the god of mischief sneak out of Asgard?" He was low-key. "The teen was on a roll as the laughter motivated him to go on. "What kind of armor protects the buttocks? Asgardian!"

"Stop! Stop!" Alvin pounded on the table. "I can't breathe!"

The teen smiled to himself. He was safe.

Over the next few weeks, the Outcasts became fairly fond of the boy. He was praised because of his cooking, for one. Vikings loved their food, and to have someone on the island with more experience in cooking, well, they had an island of happy vikings. After some conversing, Alvin found out about his blacksmithing skills. While the men had target practice, Hiccup would sharpen weapons and bring them out. This lead to lessons from the men on how to properly use weapons. Hiccup knew, of course, since everyone on Berk had tried to teach him. At first, Hiccup was not enthusiastic about the pointers, but then he changed his mind when he realized he was stronger, and therefore more capable of lifting the weapons. The most astonishing thing was when one of the experts saw his difficulties and suggested him to switch hands. No one on Berk had ever thought about the fact that he was left handed! Alvin saw his progress and was pleased.

At night, the Blacksmith would allow him to use whatever scrap metal was lying around to fix his leg.

Within a few weeks, Hiccup had found favor in so many in of the Outcasts, he was promoted from servant to—well, there wasn't really a term for him; protege, maybe. Everyone took time to teach him skills, yet he wasn't considered part of the tribe or a warrior.

Which was perfectly fine with him.

Throughout his time, he had developed ears everywhere. People where not afraid to say what they wanted around him, and he soon found that all he had ever known about blood thirsty, cruel Outcasts was untrue, in fact, Alvin was the cruelest of them all. Listening on conversations, he was elated to find that the men were unhappy with Alvin's methods.

"I miss my wife, I haven't seen her in months..."

"I wasn't able to be there when my wife gave birth—"

"My father is ill, I'd like to go help him—"

These were all things that were talked about. Not once did he hear, "I really hate those Hooligans." He came to the conclusion that while this was a land of exiled criminals, most, if not all of the men felt remorse for what they had done in the past. If it wasn't for Alvin, wellâ€¦

There would be no Outcasts.

One night, one month into his 'job,' Alvin called him into the dining room. He had been there for a very long time, and Hiccup had refilled his mug at least ten times. The man was sauced.

"Warrrt." He slurred. "Come an' take a load off!"

The teen obediently sat in the seat across from the man, his hands folded calmly in his lap.

"Now, you been 'ere forâ€¦about a month." He blinked heavily. "I've taken a shinin' to ya!"

That was a weird phrase to say to a person of the same sex.

"You're a good boy. I never 'ad any sons of me own. Never been married."

Hiccup feared where this was going.

"Butchu? You've been like a son to me. Always willin' ta do want I ask, ne'r complainin'."

He wasn't about to point out the fact that he only did that because he was terrified of being killed by this man.

"Is a shameâ€¦you bein' 'ere, all by yer lonesome." He hiccuped. "I think someday you'll think of this as yer home."

Hiccup doubted that.

â€¦

It was late in the middle of the night. Hiccup was awoken by the sound of a struggle. Behooved to check, Hiccup pressed his ear to the wooden door and heard the distinct sound of a blade cutting flesh, and a gasp of pain.

"Alvin!" His eyes widened as he opened the door. A figure, dressed in black, stood over the large viking. It looked to him and then jumped out the window, out into the night. Alvin laid on the bed, his throat slit. Hiccup ran to him to see if he was still alive. He would be damned if the man was killed and he was the only witness.

Luckily, Alvin was still gasping for air. He reached out and grabbed the boy's arm. "Wart. Wart my boy, listen."

A bit panicked, Hiccup called out. "Help! Alvin's been injured! Knife! Throat! Dying! HELP!" He really didn't want the man to dieâ€¦well, without anybody knowing the truth. He may be blamed, and then killed himself. Heavy footsteps were heard from down the hall.

"Wart, listen. I'm tired."

Oh great. Whenever someone confessed to being tired, it meant they were giving up on life. Luckily, the guards came into the room just in time.

Alvin shakily removed his helmet and put it on Hiccup's head. "You've been so helpful to us. I've felt, like you were a son to me." And the guilt was building. "Wart, you'll be a great manâ€¦lead our tribe to victory. I have faith in you." Then he let out his last breath.

Hiccup slowly turned to the two guards. "You heard that, right?"

They nodded slowly.

"Well, then, I believe a meeting of the troops is in order."

"Whatever you say," The man smiled. "Chief."

Hiccup did what every proud, strong viking would do. He stood, smiled, and then passed out.

8. Falsification

The thick oak hull sliced through the rolling waves like a freshly sharpened blade. A ship sailed, nine men aboard. Six rowing, Savage, the previous captain of the guard, leading them, and a large man with dark skin controlled the rudder, taking directions from the chief. A man stood at the stern, clad in thick leather and iron armor. His boots had a thick soles, making him taller. One boot was insulated to give the illusion of two whole legs. A mask covered his face, also made of leather, held shut by metal clasps on the left of his face. The leather was two tone, black on one side, red on the right. The man's bright green eyes shone out from behind the mask, but all other parts of his identity were hidden. Outside, the new chief of the Outcasts looked twice as threatening as the previous, the very image of him invoked the sound of violins and drums. But on the inside, there was an insecure teenage boy on his way home.

_Home. _He smiled, no one seeing it.

"Shida sana zenye msisimko yako, naona." _Barely containing your excitement, I see._ The man at the steer board spoke.

"Kama tu ungeliweza kuona uso wangu." _If only you could see my face_. He replied, hiding the joy in his voice.

The other men didn't really like it when the chief and general spoke in that foreign language, but they learned to accept it. Savage, Alvin's right hand man, was asked to step down from his roll of general, but begged to serve the chief, as he was loyal to the tribe. Hiccup allowed him to stay, but put another man above him in rank. This man, this _slave_, to be his general. But after all the good the chief had done, the men all declared they would follow him anywhere.

This new leader was quite the change from Alvin, a breath of fresh air. His first meeting was a general sit down with the troops. If anyone wanted to go back to the Atolls with their families, they were allowed to go. The conquest of Berk was cancelled, instead, there would be a treaty and trade opened between the two islands. And he said that the dragon problem would be taken care of as well. Pacified, two-thirds of the company left. Those who stayed said they would dismantle the camps and then go home. He choose six men out of the many that volunteered, to go to Berk. No weapons were to be taken, and they would fly the white flag of surrender. Only one ship, just to delegate the peace treaty, would sail. Savage was watched carefully. If there was anyone that would try to start a war with Berk, it would be him. But, so far, Savage followed every order faithfully. Hiccup secretly knew that he was afraid of losing his position. It was all he had.

"Dragons ride towards us, Sir!" Savage called from the bow.

Oh gods, this was it. Savage made his way over for instructions. "What do we do?"

"Greet them."

"With what? We've brought no weapons!"

Wart rolled his eyes. "I mean literally greet them. Never mind. Mwaba!" He called over. The Zambian looked up expectantly. "Savage will relieve you, it seems he's forgotten his manners. Please greet these incoming dragons and their riders."

Mwaba smiled.

Two dragons rode towards them. A Nadder and a Gronkle, and they were the most welcoming sight he had ever seen.

"JAMBO!" Mwaba called in his deep, penetrating voice.

"Outcasts!" Astrid shouted back. "It's been a while! State your business or we will set your boat on fire."

Mwaba looked over to Hiccup with a wide smirk. "Is dat her?"

"You bet your buttons it is."

"She esâ€|a wild one."

"Oh, you have no idea." The teen laughed back.

"Speak up!" Astrid called back.

"Weh kum en peace!" Mwaba shouted back.

"Peace? The Outcasts? Sounds like a trap to me."

"No trap, we 'ave no waapons." He called as the dragons circled the ship. "Dere es only us. Weh fly de white flag of surrenda."

Astrid looked up at the mast and sure enough it was flying.

"Where is Alvin?" She demanded. "Too much of a coward to come?"

"Alvinâ€|" Wart finally spoke, masking his voice with a rough husky sound, "Is no longer of your concern."

That got Fishlegs' and Astrid's attention. The two turned and started to discuss something, then turned back. "We will prepare your arrival, and know that if this is a trick, you'll be sorry."

How many times had he been threatened like that? He was just glad it _wasn't_ a trick.

"As long as we are welcome, no harm will come to anyone." Wart spoke dangerously, but indicating that he and his shipmates would be the ones in trouble if they weren't welcomed.

The two scouts flew back towards Berk and Hiccup let out a shaky breath. They hadn't noticed. Well, that was the point of all the armor. He clasped his hands behind his back as Berk grew nearer. He would not hesitate to admit he was nervous. That's why he decided to hide his identity until the time was right.

"Ninyi sawa?"

"I'm fine." He replied, his voice dangerously calm. "You get off the boat first, and introduce us."

"Can I call yoo Kwikwi?"

The teen laughed. "No, they need to respect me."

The man rolled his eyes. "Kwa sababu 'Wart' ni kuheshimikaâ€|" _Because Wart is so respectable._

"You never told me what title you were going by." Hiccup pointed out.

"Ef I will be makin' de intaductions, t'wil be a surprise."

Hiccup shrugged. He wasn't going to argue with the man.

Soon, the ship pulled into port. On the dock awaited a group of large vikings, Gobber, Spitelout and all of the friendly faces he had come to love. Well, they weren't exactly friendly at the moment. And Stoick the Vast was at the head of them all. His father.

Hiccup was thankful for the mask, as he couldn't contain his tears. The man had aged. In just nine months, wrinkles had formed from restless nights, and gray hairs strayed into his beard. The great chief was suffering from grief from losing his only son, after losing his wife many years ago.

"Outcasts." The chief stated. "What brings you to Berk, with no warning?"

Mwaba was the first off the boat, his size intimidating, but his smile disarming. "Please fo'give ah intrusion, weh could spa'e no men to bring a message." He brought a hand to his chest and lowered his head in respect. "Me Lord, me name es Mwaba de Rock, captain of de

guard."

The Rock. Of course he would have picked that. It was so obvious.

"An' dis es our new chief, Wart de Enslaved."

Wart walked with heavy steps off the boat, determined to walk with purpose, but inside sweating like a dog and shaking in nerves.

"New chief?" Stoick rose in shock and amazement. "Where is Alvin?"

Savage blurted from the boat. "He was killed in his sleep."

Wart raised a hand to stop him. "Savage, I beseech you, hold your tongue. You lack finesse which is needed in a delicate situation like this. Do you want to kill us?" All this was said with a chillingly calm voice.

"Sorry, my lordâ€¦."

Wart extended a hand towards the other chief. "Stoick the Vast, I have heard many things of you. Unfortunately, not many of them were goodâ€¦|you can understand though, right?"

He met him with a heavy handshake. "Yes, but I'm afraid I have never heard of youâ€¦|"

"I'm sure you wouldn't have." He smirked. "As myâ€¦|soldier has pointed out, yes, Alvin was killed in his sleep. But I was the one who found him, and he appointed me as his heir, not having any children of his own."

Stoick raised his head, processing this information. "Then what brings you here? Are you surveying so that you can continue where he left off?"

A chuckle poured from the leather mask. "No sir. I am a peaceful man. I come to make amends with Berk. My warriors are home with their wives and children. We have dragons to worry about, why would we want enemies?"

This was quite the shock to the Viking, but he hid it. "If you come in peace, why do you wear a mask? Are you going to sell us all off as your name implies?"

"I'm sure you are confused. Mwaba's accent can be difficult to understand sometimes. My name is Wart, the Enslaved, not the _Enslaver_. Stoick, if you know anything about slaves, they are stripped of their identities when put into the Thrall. The case is the same for me. When I took up the role of chief, I was still slave to Alvin. This is my identity. What lies under the mask is nothing."

A smile cracked on the hard man's face. "Well, if this is all true, then I see no reason that we can't ally. But know that if this is a trickâ€¦|"

"That I will be sorry? Yes, the threat has already been made by the

young girl on the Nadder. I assure you, there is no deceit here. If you wish to check our ship for weapons, you may, if it would make you feel better."

Gobber spoke up next, "What do we get out of it?"

"Well," Wart mulled it over. "First and foremost you would have our protection. Especially from the Berserker. They are our allies, but that can be dissolved the moment they try to strike."

"And what do you get out of it?"

Wart let some emotion of excitement show. Hiccup kept up his act. "Well, we have a dragon problem, as you know, and I've heard so many stories of the Dragon Whisperer. I was hoping he would come and teach us to train our dragons, as you have, to help us farm and hunt. There would be considerable compensation and he could bring along anyone he wished."

"I'm afraid that's not possible."

"Oh, well, I can understand, after all, you're probably still wary of us, and that makes sense."

"No, it's not just that. It's my son, Hiccup. He's been missing for months now. He ran away." He ended it there and just sighed.

"My deepest apologies," Wart replied. Hiccup was torn up inside, seeing his father still so emotionally raw from his disappearance. "I won't speak of it again."

Ever the intervener, Gobber spoke up. "Let's go up to the great hall and discuss the details of this treaty, shall we?"

The group traveled up the ramps together, the men idly chatting. Even Savage and Mwaba were talking, but Hiccup couldn't speak. Too much bare emotions were riding right on the surface. As they trekked through the village, Hiccup spotted his friends sitting on their dragons, staring the men down. Seeing Astrid there, looking even more heavenly than he imagined, he just had to talk to her. So as Gobber was gabbing to him, he raised a hand. "Excuse me for just a moment, please." Then he stepped over to the teens.

All of the dragons recognized him immediately. Even with the heavy leather, his scent was not covered. Each of the beasts came closer to him. The riders assumed they were going to attack and held them at bay. He smirked at the action and continued over to Astrid.

"Hello, girl. I didn't catch your name."

"It's Astrid." She bit back at him.

"I see, lovely name." His knees were shaking as his mind was on autopilot. Just being around her was enough to turn him into goo. "Well, Astrid. I see your distrust in your eyes. If I ever give you a reason to hate me, I give you permission to throw the first stone. Or axe, as the case may be." He smiled with his voice.

Then he addressed the others. "It's so fascinating to see you all on

dragons. I would love to learn, when time allows. I shall see you later."

As he left, Astrid spoke up. "I don't trust that guy."

Snotlout huffed. "Well, yeah! The dude wears a mask and is the leader of the Outcasts! I don't know why Stoick's even bothering to listen to him."

Fishlegs spoke up. "Maybe he sees something we don't. You know, if there's a chance of peace with the Outcasts, I think he would look into it."

"I wonder what's under that mask." Tuffnut asked. "It's so mysteriousâ€|"

"Maybe half of his face is burnt offâ€|or maybe he doesn't have any skin at all!" Ruffnut spoke.

"Maybe he's actually Hiccup." Tuff pondered.

The group collectively thought it over for a few seconds then laughed it off. "There's no way that's Hiccup. Did you forget what he was like? There's just no way!" Snotlout laughed.

"Yeah, the Outcasts probably killed him."

There was a very long, painfully awkward silence.

"Let's talk about something else..." Astrid said quietly.

As the men approached the great hall, a black blur slithered out of the house next to the doors.

Hiccup panicked. Of course he was elated to see Toothless, but if the dragon pounced on him, everything would be spoiled. Toothless inched closer to the ground, catching Hiccup's scent.

"By the godsâ€|is that a Nightfury?" Wart asked in interest.

Toothless perked up as he heard his voice. Hiccup did a hand signal to keep him at bay, and Toothless obediently stayed, but he was raring to go.

"Aye, that's Hiccup's dragon. The first dragon to be trained."

"Canâ€|can I touch him?"

"Mmm, I don't know. He doesn't take well to strangers."

Gobber smiled. "Oh, let him try Stoick."

Hiccup signed to Toothless again, to stay still. Wart approached him carefully, hand outstretched. When he reached the dragon, he laid the hand on his head and gently rubbed it. The sweet touch of the cold scales indicted tears to fall. Very quietly he whispered, "Play along, I'm a stranger. We'll go flying later." Then he brought another hand to scratch under his chin. "I missed you

bud."

Toothless understood and rigidly let him scratch him before darting off.

"What an amazing creature!" Wart exclaimed looking back to the group, a stream of invisible tears falling behind his mask. There was nothing he would rather do than just hold his best friend for a while.

"It's surprising that he let you even touch him. Maybe you remind him of Hiccup."

"I'm sure he misses him." He spoke tenderly. He looked back to the lizard that sat perched on top of the Haddock house. Their eyes met and they stared at each other for a nice long time. Toothless let out a sad roar and ducked away. Hiccup rejoined the group, ashamed.

Later that evening, after a very long discussion on the treaty, Stoick allowed Wart and Mwaba to use the house on the hill while they were there. Hiccup and Astrid's house. Just entering it, Hiccup could feel like he belonged there. His sketches were all over the walls, a bed for Toothless in the corner, everything that he could have wanted.

"This was originally going to be my son's house when he got married—no one else has lived here, but—"

"We'll take care of it." He assured the man. With that, Stoick left the two alone. As soon as the door closed, Hiccup took off his helmet and breathed a sigh of content.

"I can breathe!" He popped the clasps on his jacket to let cool air in.

"Dat es de longest time yoo have gone wit it on, yea?"

"Yeah, and it is good to be free. After being naked for seven months it's strange to wear clothes."

Mwaba laughed as he completely agreed.

Then there was a knock at the door. Hiccup's shoulders dropped as he slicked back his sweaty hair. "Just a minute." He secured the leather and went to the door.

Five teens had piled into his doorway. He was taken back in shock for a moment as he realized that he was not on a step above them, he was literally taller than all, except Fishlegs, but they were matched.

"Oh, hey, guys."

Fishlegs initiated contact. "So you said you wanted to know more about dragons so we were wondering if you wanted to come with us tomorrow when we have class so we can teach you about them!" He was obviously excited.

"Wow, that's— that's really nice of you guys to think of me, but

I've still got some details to finalize with the chief." He saw the dejected looks on everyone's faces. "But maybe the next day! I would love to learn anything!"

"Sweet! But you've got to teach us some Outcast fighting techniques." Snotlout demanded.

"F-F-Fighting techniques?"

Mwaba laughed from inside the house. Hiccup glanced at him in warning.

"Sure, I could teach you some."

"Awesome! See ya later, Wart!" And the teens ran off, all but one, that is.

"Uh...Astrid, right?" He looked down at her as the blonde crossed her arms. She was even more beautiful up close. He could just reach out and touch her.

"Don't get too comfortable." She narrowed her eyes.

"I know, you don't trust me." He raised his hands in defense.

"No, I don't. But more importantly, this house is not yours, it's his. And I'll be damned before you ruin it. You will never take his place!"

"That was never my intention, my lady." He reached out and tilted her chin.

He saw her eyes widen minutely as her lip quivered.

"Goodnight, Astrid." He prompted her.

"G-Goodnight." She blushed and stormed off.

He closed the door and removed his helmet again. "That was weird."

"She likes yoo." Mwaba explained.

"What? No, that's how she treated me before the whole Toothless incident."

"Tink about what she said. She said yoo would never replace...weh...yoo. I tink she es startin' to like yoo and fee's guilty."

"You think so?"

"I dunt knoo, but maybee."

"I'll have to figure out a way to test it."

"Latea, yoo 'ave 'ad a long day, yoo must rest."

He took his jacket off completely and hung it up to air out. "Not yet, I promised Toothless we'd go flying together tonight."

Mwaba smiled broadly. "'Oo am I to keep a boy from 'is dragoon?"

"More like, who are you to keep a dragon from his boy?" He removed the sweaty shirt he had been wearing under his armor. "I better wash up while I have the chance."

"I go to sleep den." Mwaba started, getting up. "Dere es only one bed."

"You take it. I'll be fine on the bench down here."

"Ah yoo sure?"

"Yeah, I don't think I'll sleep much anyways."

"Kubakia na afya." _Stay healthy_.

The teen smiled at the giant as he headed over to the wash basin. A mirror hung in front of it. By the light of the fire, Hiccup examined at himself. He certainly had changed since he had left. His face had thinned out, his jaw becoming more chiseled, his cheek bones more defined. His eyes were narrow and dare he say, brighter? His hair was longer, starting to sprout from his jaw, all the way up to his ears. He kept his upper lip clean shaven though, not liking the look. His nose had stayed the same though, round and large, but in the comparison of the rest of his face, it wasn't dorky looking. His smart-ass grin was vaguely there, but not so genuine as he had seen too much to be cocky anymore. He splashed water onto his face, letting the water drip over his knotted knuckles and long fingers. He looked up, and noticing the visible bags from many sleepless nights leading up to this trip. With a sigh, he realized there were more to come. A saturated wash cloth was rung out and used to dab the sweat away from his newly formed muscles, from all that hard work he had done before. It was times like this when his gaze drifted over his scars and the dragon tattoo painted on his chest. It didn't matter if he was home, he still had been marked from his time gone.

Yes, he had changed. With a short grin, he believed it was for the better. He was smart and mature for his age, but he needed to grow. He could just imagine Snotlout teasing him, calling him the 'Butterfly Man'. It really was rather funny and he started to laugh out loud.

"Wat es so funny?" Mwaba's tenor called from above.

He snorted and replied. "I am the Butterfly Man!"

There was a huff in response before Mwaba added. "Ajabu." _Weirdo_.

That night, Hiccup was fortunate that there was no moon for him to be spotted. He snuck out of his house and crept over to the forge. It was empty, and he took up his saddle from the back. He then crept back to his father's house and climbed the side of the house to look in the skylight. He peered in, ready to call to Toothless, but stopped short as his breath hitched.

Astrid was sleeping in his bed, cuddling one of his shirts. He felt

sick. How long had she been doing that? Deftly, he pulled himself into the room and touched the floor softly. Toothless heard the noise and looked up. Hiccup held a finger up to hush him.

The boy leaned over Astrid and took in her beauty for the first time in nine months, without the restraints of a mask or pretending not to look at her. She had aged as well, but in a good way. Her hair was longer, her bangs not so sharp, but sweeping. Her dark lashes laid against pale cheeks as she slept soundly. Her pink satin lips parted ever so gently to breathe.

Hiccup's eyes drifted over to see a ring on her finger, one of rose gold, cloisonné. Tears welled up unconsciously as guilt riddled his soul. She was missing him substantially. He would have to do something to make it up. He kissed the top of her head very delicately, and then beckoned for Toothless.

Boy and Dragon slipped off into the night, like a shadow completely unseen.

Hiccup, for the first time since the idea of marriage was even brought up, finally felt free. Even if there were secrets being kept now, he still was more pleased with his position.

"Aw bud, I've missed this way too much."

The dragon went into a spiral in response.

Hours passed before Hiccup decided to land and go to bed. Outside of the Haddock house, Toothless was hesitant to let Hiccup leave as he enveloped him in a tight squeeze, putting even his wings and tail into it.

"Toothless!" He hugged the reptile in response. "I swear, I won't ever leave again. If I must, you will come too. I promise."

This seemed to sedate the dragon as he let him go, but first lathered him with saliva from a lick. Hiccup sent him back to bed, his heart swelling with emotion. At least someone hadn't been sore about him leaving.

Hiccup retired to his cabin, laying on a bench in the main room. But sleep was far from his mind, as he stared at the burning embers of the fire until morning.

9. Mistakes

Astrid angrily stabbed her porridge with her spoon. She sat on the steps the great hall, where she had been sitting for the last three hours. A sign hung on the door, indicating the meeting was private and no one was allowed to enter. Astrid's mother had brought her food since she was obstinate on hearing the outcome.

It wasn't fair, she was honorary substitute hope and heir to the Hooligan tribe. That should have gotten her into that meeting! Right?

The only ones allowed in were Stoick, Gobber, and Spitelout from the Hooligan tribe, and Wart, Mwaba, and Savage from the Outcasts. Equal

and even representation. So it made sense that she was sequestered outside. But as soon as that door opened, she was going to pry all information she could out of the chief.

The doors opened and the three Outcasts came out, the door shutting behind them. Mwaba and the chief were chatting as Savage went away without a word.

"I dunt dink dey take me seriously." Mwaba stated. "Es it de way I look?"

"I doubt it. It might be your accent though, it can be hard to understand sometimes."

"Well, wat do I do about it?"

"You just have to practice your Norse. Try saying this; how many boards would a Mongol hoard, if a Mongol hoard hoarded boards."

"'ow many whores wod a mongrel bored ef ahâ€|mongrel boar bored whores."

Hiccup was silent for a moment until a choking laugh came out. "Yep, you got it."

Astrid approached the two.

"Astrid! You look radiant this morning!"

She ignored him. "How is the meeting? Where's Stoick?"

"Oh, dey are still in meetin'."

"They want to discuss some stuff, so they kicked us out."

Astrid huffed. "Figures, men."

"Since we have some time to spare, do you think I could see the academy?"

Astrid groaned. "Fine! Sure, let's go." She picked up her bowl and stormed back to her house.

"Do yoo dink she es angry?"

"What gave you that idea?" Hiccup rolled his eyes.

"Well, de shoutin' and de way she said-â€|"

"Dear Odin, Mwaba, I was being sarcastic."

"I 'aven't gotten to dat lesson yet."

"I've been teaching you for six months and I never got to sarcasm? It's like a second language to me!"

"I tought dat Swahili was your second language?"

"Oh sweet mother of Thorâ€|"

Out at the ring, Mwaba stayed outside and watched from the top while Wart joined the teen's studying on the inside. The lesson that Fishlegs was giving halted when the leather bound man stepped into the ring.

"Look who showed up!" Said Snotlout to Astrid.

"Can it, maggot face!"

"I thought you were going to try to get in on the treaty meeting?" Asked Fishlegs.

"They wouldn't let me! And besides, I knew you guys were dying to talk to _this_ guy." She pointed at Wart with her thumb.

"I have a name."

"Yeah, after a disgusting skin growth."

Actually, after a involuntary diaphragm spasm. But he wasn't about to correct her.

"So, are you going to show us some of your cool moves?" Asked Tuffnut.

"I thought you were going to show me how to train a dragon?"

"Aw man, come on! We've been sitting here all day! Just show us one move!" Snotlout begged.

Hiccup was not used to having him beg, and thought it was a nice change of pace. "Alright," he snapped his fingers like a chief. "Bring me a sword!" He commanded.

The bulky teen hurriedly rushed to the weapons room in the back of the arena. Astrid crossed her arms and took a seat on a barrel. She hated to admit it, but she was excited to see Outcast fighting techniques. Toothless had come to sit beside Mwaba up top, and no one but the Zambian noticed.

As Snotlout scrounged around for a weapon intact, Hiccup withdrew a pouch from his belt. The twins watched in curiosity as he took out a handkerchief and put some liquid from the pouch on it.

"This was the only one not dented." Snotlout came back and handed him the sword.

Hiccup recognized it as one of the ones he made, but it was likely no one else knew. "It's a fine blade. My compliments to the smith." He then began to rub the cloth on the surface of the weapon. "What I am about to show you is not practical in the battle field, except for intimidation. It was created by yours truly." He tucked the cloth away. "I call it 'dragon's son'."

Unknown to anyone, Hiccup had constructed his gloves with flint in the fingertips, so that a spark would ignite upon a snap. He undid one of the clasps on his mask so that his mouth was freed, took a quick swig from the pouch, and raised his blade in a pensive stance. The teens watched in wonder as he placed one foot over the other and waited.

"What is this? Some sort of meditation-â€|?"

Hiccup cut him off by spinning once and coming out of his turn by spewing the liquid from his mouth and snapping his fingers. The result was a giant fireball that engulfed the blade. The young dragon trainers were in awe as he deftly twirled the sword in his hand as if it was a rope. The flames licked at his leather, but he remained calm as he twisted the blade to fly up behind his back, caught it backwards and then flung it at high speed so it stuck to the wooden board.

His eyes were wide as cheers and praises poured from the teens. At first, their reactions went unnoticed, he was too surprised by how well that had gone off. Of course he had practiced it quite a few times, but it had never gone off so flawlessly before. He was impressed, with himself!

Snotlout came up ranting and raving. "You've got to show me how to do that! That was so cool! With the flames and the sword-â€|"

"I'd ask to learn it, but I'd probably set my lips on fire. I've done it before, but the recovery period made it less fun." Stated Tuffnut.

Hiccup snapped himself out of his trance and cinched his mask shut. "Maybe some other time. Alright, you've had your trick, let's learn!"

Fishlegs spoke up. "We were just having a lesson on what to expect from other foreign dragons."

"Oh, by all means, continue. I'll just observe." Wart took a seat on one of the crates and listened.

"Okay, who knows the average shot limit of a dragon?"

There was silence as Snotlout sat with his head on his arm, Tuffnut with his finger up his nose, and Ruffnut down for the count.

"Astrid?" Fishlegs sighed. Apparently, he had asked one her too many times.

"It's six." She rolled her eyes.

Hiccup just had to, just HAD to! He let out a sniggering snort at her answer. She turned and looked offended. "What is it?"

"I'm sorry," he cleared his throat. "It's just that you gave the mode, not the mean."

He got five sets of blank stares before pushing off the seat. "Here, let me explain." He took the chalk from Fishlegs. "Six is the most common occurring shot limit belonging to dragons, accounting for four types of dragons. That would be the average for those four. Now, if a Changewing has a shot limit of ten and a Deadly Nadder has eleven, the average shot of those two is not going to be six. So we list the shot limits of the dragon types we know of. Fireworm two, gronckle six, Zippleback six, Monstrous Nightmare tenâ€|" And he started to

write a list of all the dragons and their shot limits, directly from memory. Soon he had a full list of known dragons written on the board. "So if you add up all of them, you get a total of 147. So then you divide it by the number of dragon types and you getâ€¦" His fingers twitched as he mentally did the math. "Eight point one six seven. Or roughly forty-nine sixths."

Snotlout moaned. "We had to put up with this with Hiccup! Now we have it from the new guy? Boring!"

Hiccup reeled for a moment. He let his perfectionist and intellectual nature get the best of him. It was just a matter of time before they figured it out. Then again, three out of five of them were morons, so really, the steaks weren't that high.

"How did you have all those statistics memorized?" Asked Fishlegs in wonder.

Think Hiccup, you've been able to lie your way out of these things before. "The book of Dragons. Alvin has a book that is filled with information of Dragons. I memorized it." Then he placed his hands dangerously behind his back. "After all, knowledge is power."

There was a long silence as what he had just said resonated with them. Not perhaps his words, but the way he said them. It reminded all of them that this man was still a part of the Outcasts, their chief. And they were all acting chummy with him. As apparent by his sword handling skills, he was very dangerous.

Astrid then spoke up. "Do you know where he got that book?"

"I'm afraid I haven't the slightest." Wart replied.

"He stole it. He blackmailed a girl to come into our tribe and steal it. Hiccup wrote most of the stuff in that book!"

"Fret not my dear Astrid. In all honesty, Alvin didn't understand half the stuff in that book anyways."

"Where is it now?" She asked with clenched teeth.

"Why don't you search me?" He teased. Where in Migard had this flirtatious demeanor come from? He didn't mind it, he liked seeing Astrid flustered, because he was never able to do that to her before. It wasâ€¦empowering. She blushed and turned away from him. "So, if that's it, I've got some things to discuss with my men before we are called back into the meeting. This was fun, let's do it again sometime." With that, he turned and walked from the arena.

Once he was gone, Snotlout let out a laugh. "Looks like someone's got a crush on leather buns!"

Astrid turned at him harshly, her face hot with anger and embarrassment. "Say one more thing and I will take your head off with my own hands!"

"Oooo, denial, it must be true!" Added Tuffnut before he was harshly elbowed by his sister. Ruffnut may not have been the brightest bulb, but as a woman, she could see Astrid's conflicted heart.

The blonde was falling for the Outcast leader, and that was not something to joke about.

Before she did something she regretted, Astrid high tailed it out of the arena. Her mind was overwhelmed, her heart slowly tearing apart. As she was a distance away, she stopped and looked out towards the ocean. Images of his concealed face were burned into her retinas. She hated the way her heart sped up when he had revealed his mouth. The way his lips had formed an 'O' when he breathed that fire had made her toes curl. What did he look like under that mask? Was he utterly handsome? Or was he a male version of Darla? Maybe he was scarred and he wore the mask to conceal his hideous flaws. What was under that mask?

Astrid hated falling in love. It was an emotion that she wasn't used to, and it was painful going through it. It had only happened to her once before. When she fell for

Hiccup.

Oh she felt awful. His ring on her finger felt inexplicably heavy as it pulled her to the ground.

"I've betrayed you" She whispered.

No. She decided. No matter what lied underneath, no charming man, nor troll, she didn't care. That man in the leather armor was a neighboring chief. She was bound to Hiccup, despite what anyone else thought. Despite if he never returned. He was hers, and she was his. Nothing would change that.

"Well, well, what's this?" An all too familiar voice asked. She clenched her fist. "Are you alright? Do you need some help?"

She didn't need his help. She didn't want his sympathy. Like a snake, she uncoiled and lashed out, sending her fist into his face.

Well, if his damn mask hadn't been in the way. Instead, she made him stumble a few steps back as she nursed her throbbing hand.

"That must have hurt."

She just glared at him.

"If you want to punch me, I'd go for the stomach, because it's not lined with metal like the rest of the suit."

She heeded his advice and punched him over and over. Occasionally he would grunt in pain, but she kept going. Again and again her angry fists landed on his stomach, her joints cracking and her knuckles splitting open. She finally stopped when her fingers were covered in blood.

"Better?" He asked as she panted.

"You can't" She stopped, biting her lips.

"I can't what, my dear?"

"That! That right there! You can't, no matter how hard you try!"

He genuinely was confused, women had a tendency to do that to him.
"You're going to have to be more exactâ€¦"

"You can't replace him!"

Oh.

Hiccup looked downward. _Just apologize, and leave her alone_. But his feet were carrying him to her side. His lower clip was undone and he leaned in so he could speak right into her ear. His lips almost touched her lobe and his hand rested on her shoulder. He whispered softly, "Don't underestimate me." Then breathed a warm breath on her skin. She shuttered.

Unable to do anything else, she clapped her hands over her face and ran blindly. She was angry, but mostly at herself. She allowed him to have this effect on her, after everything that she went through with Hiccup.

People called to her, telling her to watch out for things, but she miraculously dodged them all. Until, that is, she smacked into a broad chest. Astrid looked up to a kind, dark skinned face.

"Jambo, Astreed!" The general smiled. "Yoor chief es aboot to make an announcement. Weh go, yea?"

"Please, Iâ€¦I just need some timeâ€¦" Her voice was too soft and he didn't hear it. Instead, his large hands guided her to the town square where everyone was gathered. Stoick stood up on the steps of the great hall with the other leaders. She saw Wart running to take his place.

She watched with sheer horror as her chief shook hands with the Outcast, sealing their agreement.

"My friends!" Stoick's voice was loud as he clapped a hand on Wart's shoulder. "Today, a difficult decision has been made. One that we have prayed for for many years. Today, the war between the Outcasts and Berk is over!"

A cheer ran up through the crowd.

Then Stoick gestured for the other chief to speak. "My friends, I cannot express how thankful I am for such a smooth agreement. Our tribes have been at war for far too long. To complete this alliance, there is only one condition on your part that I ask.

"You see, the Outcast island had previously banned the presence of women and children. All those at the Atolls are accounted for. I would like to ask you all permission to take my bride from your tribe."

Dread hit Astrid like a hundred bricks. _No. No. No. He wouldn't dare!_

"I choose Astrid Hofferson to be my bride."

All at once, the eyes of the tribe turned and looked on her.

"Astrid." His voice was piercing, familiar, warm, and yetâ€|cold and harsh, all at the same time. "Do you consent to be my wife?"

"No." She answered quickly. "No, I can't."

She saw the faces of those around her, faces that her telling her to change her decision. It was what was the best for the tribe, wasn't it? But, Hiccup had asked her before, under obligation, and she refused him as well. She broke his heart. She could do it again. "I refuse."

He sauntered down the steps towards her. "Why? Am I revolting? Do you hate me? If I am interpreting things rightâ€|the blushes, the embarrassed looksâ€|you like me."

"No, I don't." She closed her eyes. Carefully she twisted the ring on her finger.

"You are in denial."

"No!" Then she bravely met his eyes. "I'm spoken for!"

Hiccup smiled behind his mask. Finally, she was doing what he was hoping for. "By who, pray tell?"

"Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III." She stated proudly.

"Ah." He stepped closer still. "And he proposed to you before he disappearedâ€|funny, I heard he ran away. Why would he run awayâ€|if he was engaged? Oh wait, he wasn't engagedâ€|you refused him, too."

The crowd watched Astrid as her jaw quivered, but she glared daggers at him.

"Did you love him? Or do you feel guilt? Do you think it was your fault he ran away?" The second and third questions was what he expected her to answer to.

"Yes." She resolutely answered. "I love him. I've loved him for a very long time, much before he ran away. And yes, I feel like it's my fault he ran away. Are you happy?" Her voice had a bite to it as she raised her head in pride.

He wasn't expecting that answer. Honestly, he couldn't really imagine Astrid loving him back. Especially after all those awful things he had said. Yet, here she was, saying she had waited for him. Even in the face of obligation, peace with the Outcasts, she still proclaimed herself to Hiccup. He was unable to move, to speak, as she glared at him.

He had backed himself into a corner without even realizing it. He wanted this agreement to go through, but what else was there to do? Then he had an awful idea.

He lowered his head. "That is what I was afraid of." He heard the crowd whispering. Wart raised his head and addressed the crowd. "My friends, I haven't been completely honest with you." He stated, waltzing through the throng. "Iâ€|have withheld certain information

that I should have said when I first arrived, but I was afraidâ€”and it takes a lot for me to be afraid." He held his hands behind his back. "As you may or may not know, before I was chief, I was a slave. It so happens to beâ€”" he gulped. "Nine months ago, I came over a boy that my master had bought. A tiny lad, missing his left leg."

Gasps went over the crowd. Mwaba touched Astrid's shoulder in comfort. He couldn't fathom why Hiccup would be lying about this.

"He worked very hard. He did his best, but always managed to mess up somehow. Mwaba and I, we did our best to help him out, because the world of the thrall is merciless. When I asked him how he ended up in such a place, he said that he ran away. He said that no one wanted him where he was, and he fled because he loved them too much to be a burden."

"Why did you say nothing of this before!?" Shouted Stoick from the steps. "Where is he? Where is my son?!"

Wart lowered his head once again. "I haven't finished."

Stoick held himself at bay.

"A few months in, a pregnant slave went into labor. No one was helping her, because we all knew that children would die in the thrall, and that keeping them until they did just caused heartbreak. But this boy, he didn't know any better, so he helped her, and then cared for the infant in her stead." He wanted to vomit he felt so sick from what he was saying. It hurt so much! "He cared for that baby for three months, sacrificing rations, his blankets, his free time, everything. He suffered so much abuse on his behalfâ€”then his mistress decided she didn't want him anymore. She said that he was a pathetic excuse for a man."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Astrid hug herself.

"He sent the baby away, by training a terror! He trained a dragon to carry off the only ray of light that came for him in that dark world. Thenâ€”that small boy, with so much potential was taken out and floggedâ€”" He inhaled sharply through his nose and stood up straight. "Astrid, Hiccup is dead."

All at once, her shoulders slumped heavily and her eyes slid shut, no doubt the image of his feeble form coming to her mind.

"As soon as I saw him train that dragon, I knew who he was. I knew where he was from. I vowed that I would come and deliver the message of his death, so he would not be another nameless loss in this industry...I'm sorry."

She stood frozen in place, her mouth open ever so slightly, but she was completely still.

"No." Stated Stoick, angrily coming towards him. "You're lying! Why would you say such things!" The large man grabbed his shoulders. "Why?!"

"It is never easy to deliver bad news."

The older man started to sorrowfully cry as he shook the chief. "Why now? Why didn't you say something when you came off the boat?!"

Truth be told, this was not the plan. He was not supposed to hide his identity so long, but the longer he waited, the more he feared he would be plagued as a traitor.

"I didn't...I..." He had to think of an excuse. "I didn't want his death to be the reason for you to not accept the treaty. I thought it was best, for both our tribes..." The Outcast tribe was supposed to be a present, an apology for running out on his father and deserting his tribe. Now, everything was backwards. He messed up, again, as usual.

At least somethings hadn't changed.

He heard a hyperventilating breath as Astrid had finally snapped out of her state of shock. "No." She whispered. Hiccup could feel it coming, the explosion of emotion.

"Nnnooooo!" She screamed, "Hiccup! HICCUP!" As if calling for him was going to make him come back.

You killed him. A voice in her head chanted. _You're the reason he left_!

She covered her blubbering lips with her hands. "I'm sorry, Hiccup. I'm so so sorry!" She squeaked out.

Hiccup had been waiting for an apology. She broke his heart, and when he needed her the most, she wasn't there for him. Now, looking at her like this, he realized that his wants were wrong.

He looked up to Mwaba for direction, but the giant just scowled at him. He had every right to be angry, this was not how it was supposed to go. This was not right.

"As-sstâ€|" He fumbled, then found his voice. "Astrid, I know this is hard for you to hear, but-â€|"

"SHUT UP!" She screamed back at him. "I don't want to hear your voice! Never! NEVER AGAIN!"

Oh boy, was he in trouble.

He ignored her ravings and grabbed her wrist. Through his mask he met teary eyes. "Come up to the house later, I need to speak to you about this."

"I won't marry you! Not even if you were the last person on earth!"

Ouch. "You don't mean thatâ€|"

"Yes! Yes I do! I hate you!" She punched his chest.

The blow wasn't as strong, and he barely swayed. "Okay." He gave in. "But please, come talk to me."

She pulled her arm forcefully away.

"Astrid," Stoick boomed over to her. "Heed to him, it's not his fault." Even though he said it, the chief still held a look of grief. "Everyone, this meeting is adjourned." He stated and then walked back to his home.

As everyone departed in mourning, Hiccup looked to his mentor, Gobber, to see he had resorted to sitting on the steps of the hall, his head in his hands. Everything looked bleak.

Mwaba came and stood at his side. No matter how badly he messed up, he would still have the loyalty of his right hand man. "Wewe kijinga kichoyo mtoto." _You stupid, selfish child_. He stated.

"You've got that right." Hiccup confessed. Scornfully, he trudged back to his home on the hill, followed by the giant.

As soon as the door shut, Hiccup ripped off his helmet and chucked it all the wall, shouting profanity.

"Wey did yoo do dat!?" Mwaba shouted, equally as angry. "Nilifikiri wewe kupendwa hawa watu!" _I thought you loved these people_.

"I did! I do! Ugh! I don't know why I said all of that! I'm so mad I could just-â€|NAH!" He brought his fists down on a nearby table. "I always mess up! Always! I'm sorry Mwaba, I know this wasn't what we talked aboutâ€|"

"I am not de one yoo need to 'pologeese to." The giant had calmed, just hearing Hiccup's frustration. The man was not prone to anger, and it was spent quickly. "If Astreed kumsâ€|"

"I know. And I will. I justâ€|" He collapsed on a bench, his hand caressing his forehead. "She's going to hate me."

There was silence in the room before the older and wiser finally spoke. "I tinkâ€|yoo might 'ave doon et, because yoo wanted to pay her back. I tink dat yoo were just filled wid so much bittaness, yoo let it out in front of everyone. She rejected yoo, and dat is not easily forgivenâ€|but yoo will forgive 'er."

"I already have forgiven her. When she came right out and said that she's been in love with me for a long timeâ€|and she said she felt guilty because I leftâ€|I can't stay mad at her."

"And wid love, she wun't stay mad at yoo."

"Oh, I hope you're right. I'll explain everything to her." He looked over to the mirror hanging over the wash basin. His reflection was always foreign, so changed. Maybe, he had picked up the poison laced within the Outcast tribe. He was there long enough. For him to just devastatingly cut down everyone like he had, it sounded like a true Outcast.

"How did you avoid it?" He asked.

"Wat?"

"This, thisâ€|evil state of mind that all of the Outcasts take on! You were there longer then I was, but you're a good personâ€|"

"No, Kwikwi, I'm not. Et helped dat I did not speak to fellow men, as dey did not speak to me. I was changed too, for de worse. I hope dat bein' here will heal de wounds."

Hiccup smiled at him in sympathy. The man had gone through Hel in his life, he deserved a place of peace to live out his life.

Hiccup looked desolately to the mask sitting on the floor. He had made it to hide his identity, but hated the personality that shone through it.

"I see conflict in yur eyes. I leave yoo aloon." Mwaba stated before leaving.

A part of the boy didn't want Mwaba to go. He didn't want to be alone with his guilt, with his thoughts. But it was for the best. He had to sort his thoughts and figure out what to say to tell Astrid. He owed her a long explanation.

As he sat alone in his home, there was a scratching sound before Toothless popped in through the sky light. He saw his friend sitting alone and felt the wretched aura coming off of him in waves. Hiccup was surprised when his arms were nudged by a nuzzle.

"Oh bud!" He embraced the dragon, his friend. At least one person wasn't angry with him.

10. Reconciliation

It felt like days. Hiccup sat on the floor, arms around his legs, forehead on his knees, berating himself. _Stupid stupid stupid._

Toothless sat at his feet, crooning sadly as he attempted to console his boy. Ever since he reappeared, the human was acting strange. He did not ride him out in the sun, not that Toothless didn't like night rides, but it was strange. The boy acted differently. Was it the leather? Was it the kind, dark skin man? What happened while he was missing?

If Toothless ever found who broke his boy, surely, he would maul them.

The dragon's attention was returned to the teen as he shuddered. His fingers twitched, his breathing was harsh, but the dragon did not smell the salt of tears.

"Why am I so pathetic?" Hiccup whispered. _A pathetic excuse for a man_.

He grasped his head and frantically shook at his mahogany locks. "What am I supposed to tell her?" He asked his friend.

Toothless had a few words, but being a dragon, he could not say them.

A knock came from the door.

"Just a minute." He called, his heart racing. He stood to answer, but fear stopped him. _Not yet_. He stole the mask from the corner where he threw it, and secured it, fastening the clasps on his jacket as he went to the door.

It was Astrid. She looked dismal and incredibly small with slumped shoulders and somber mien. He smiled tenderly, but she didn't see it.

"Please, come in." He moved to the side.

She sauntered, all perk and fight gone. He saw the puffy eyelids, the bloodshot irises; she had been crying. The fact that he caused it made him feel sick.

"Tea?"

"Oh, I'm-â€|" Before she could refuse, a ceramic mug was in her hands. "Thank you." She took a small sip. Astrid noticed the onyx dragon curled up peacefully by the fire, but didn't have a chance to think much about it.

Before anything else was said, Wart stated clearly. "I'm not the one responsible for it. Please don't blame me."

"I know, and it was wrong of me to accuse you." She said softly.

The overwhelming politeness scared the teen, she wasn't usually like this. It was just another example of all the damage he had done.

"But, the question of marriage is still out?"

"Why me?" She countered.

That was a good question. Obviously it was her beauty, her zest, her power, and the tiniest traces of kindness and love in between. He could have said that, but technically, he had only known her for a couple days, and he didn't want to come off creepy. He finally answered, "You were Hiccup's, and I wanted to make sure you were cared for." That sounded nice.

"Well, I'm flattered and that's kind of you, but just for the moment, you aren't my favorite person."

He laughed and then blurted. "I'm sure you'll be in my arms by the end of the night."

"What's that supposed to mean?" She narrowed her eyes.

Oops. "Nothing." He cleared his throat. "But, won't you please think about it?"

"I already have, and the answer is no. There is no good reason to say yes!"

"Not even for your tribe?"

She was silent, trying to think of a rebuttal.

"Stoick told me that he picked you to take up my place in case he never came back."

She nodded, indicating that he was right.

"If you and I were to marry, our children would be heirs to both tribes. The Hooligan and Outcast tribes would be united as one. Don't you want what's best for your people?"

She sighed. "This is why I turned down Hiccup." She looked hard into his eyes. "No matter how much I loved him, I couldn't stand the thought of him marrying me just because his dad told him to. I wanted it to be special, and while I usually don't care about those things, it's different when it comes to Hiccup. I understand what good it is for the tribe, but I'm too selfish for that."

He was about to comment back when the door swung open and Snotlout came in. "Astrid!"

The blonde whirled around. "Snotlout!? What are you doing here!?"

Hiccup set his mouth into a firm line. If he had had his mask off, and Snotlout had just barged in like that, things would have been very very bad. Calmly, he said, "We're having a quite personal, intimate moment here. So could you maybe come back at a slightly less awful time?"

"Is this guy giving you trouble? Because I'll punch him if he is! Even if he does have a flaming sword!"

Hiccup sighed. "I guess that's a no then, seeing as you're still here."

"Snotlout, I'm fine. Really, we're just talking."

"Okay—but if you need anything, don't hesitate to call for me." He flexed. "I'm all yours, babe."

Astrid rolled her eyes, but still, she was grateful that he came to check on her. "Get out of here." She spoke in a gentle tone. Thankfully the teen left without argument. Afterwards, a pregnant silence hung in the house.

"No feelings toward Snotlout?"

She scoffed. "Absolutely not."

"Why? He seems like a stocky, buff, raw manly type."

"And that is not my type. Even before I liked Hiccup, I held disgust towards Snotlout. Sometimes his heart is in the right place, but most of the time he's a selfish idiot."

"I see."

"Yep."

"Soâ€¦you're set on Hiccup, then."

"I'll die an old hag, if I have to."

"Pity." His heart was thundering. Just tell her. Take off the stupid mask! "Do you think he loved you?"

"I know he did. He said so, right before he left. He yelled it at me, really, along with things that no one has ever said to me before. He said I was beautiful. If anyone else would have said that, I would have taken their head off."

"I can vouch for that."

"Stillâ€¦If he were to ask me again, to marry him, I would say yes without hesitation."

"Even though he's gone and someone else, with the ability to support you for a lifetime, has asked you instead?"

"That's right."

"Soâ€¦you've asked yourself the most important question. Would you rather have a chief?" He slowly unclasped his mask. The thick leather slid over the tip of his nose and his forehead, before releasing his mop of hair to explode outward. He stared at her the same way he did the night he had shown her Toothless, the same look that confessed that he would forsake his tribe for his best friend. The look that harkened all of her attention, and every fiber of seriousness she could muster. He finished in a rich and vivid baritone. "Or a runt?"

A clay mug shattered as it slipped from Astrid's hands and hit the floor. Neither of them moved. He watched her, calculated her reaction as she stood dumbfounded, taking him in.

After many breathless moments she asked, in a much too small voice. "Hiccup?"

"Hi." He smiled ever so slightly.

She didn't know if she wanted to punch him or kiss him, but she did neither. Instead, she pointed a shaking finger at him and whispered, "You." She had meant to scream it, but her voice was strangely absent.

He nodded, letting her say whatever she needed.

"Wh-What's wrong with you?! Do you know how scared I was!? How scared all of us were!? You said you were dead! You faked your own death!"

"I know you're angryâ€¦"

"Of course I'm angry! I could kill you if I was over the fact that you're actually alive! Why did you say all that!? Why did you lie?!"

"I-â€¦"

"So you just decided that you would run away and join the Outcasts!? Our sworn enemies!"

"Now, wait!"

"You were gone for months! Months Hiccup! Without a word! The only thing we get is a baby and a message that says it's too dangerous for him with you! Do you know how much that freaked me out?!"

"Well..."

"Wait until your father hears about this! I can't believe you, of all people, would do such heinous things!" She stormed towards the door, ready to rampage out into town.

She couldn't though. His hand grabbed hers on the handle as he forcefully pushed her against the wood. Her anger was snuffed out as she took in how much he had changed. His face was so close, she could feel the heat in his cheeks. It was then that she noticed his earring, the nail that had punctured his lobe. He looked down at her with a mixed countenance of anger and pleading. "You can go tell everyone. My father, Gobber, the academy, but you're going to listen to what I have to say before you do. Understand?" His voice had an edge to it and she nodded shakily.

He released her, but locked the door, so there would be no more disturbances.

"Please, have a seat."

She sat heavily, and waited for him to explain. Her throat felt thick as she tried to swallow.

"I didn't lie. Not totally." He confessed. She looked at him, offended; was he questioning her intelligence? "When I ran away, my plan was to sail away and get lost at sea—and maybe even drift off the edge of the world. But, I washed up on the Outcast Atolls instead, and I was taken into the Thrall, as I said." He unclasped his jacket, took it off, and then removed the shirt underneath, baring his scarred torso to her gaze. "They marked me, beat me, abused me, and I soon regretted leaving Berk. Mwaba was the first and only friend I made while I was there—I think it was because he reminded me of Toothless in a way. He didn't speak Norse when I first met him." He simpered. "A girl was pregnant when I went in, and she did give birth, and I delivered him, that is all true."

"Why didn't you say on the note where you were?" She asked softly.

"I came to love that baby, just as if he was my own. I didn't care about myself when I sent him off, I just wanted him to be safe." His voice was splintered.

"Hiccup, Pippin's been in good hands," She twiddled her thumbs. "Mrs. Larson has been the wet nurse for him, but—" she hesitated, "I've been taking care of him, my mom and I, really. I understand what you mean." She said nothing else and urged him to go on.

He smiled slightly as his shoulders just began to relax. "My mistress

hated me, and for one reason or another, she wanted me to be destroyed. So, her husband took me back to the tradersâ€”and they were so angry. I was flogged, to the point where I could have died." He turned so she could see his back and the defects upon it. "They put me in a cage to be used as a dragon lure, but Alvin found me first, and took me as his own slave.

"I looked so different at the time, he didn't recognize me. Thankfully. I found that he was waiting for Hiccup to return to Berk before he attacked, so I stayed. As safety for all of you, I did my best to climb the ranks and get in on the inner workings. Alvin said, the night he was killed, that I was like a son to him, and so that's why I was given role as chief. I didn't feel like the man was a father figure, I was just scared of being killed." He shyly chuckled. "We still don't know who murdered Alvin, but I was grateful that I was not accused."

"So why did you say you died?" Her eyebrows furrowed.

"I did. The night I got your message back, the Hiccup that you remembered from those long months ago, died. I was so ashamed. I ran out on everyone forâ€” what now seems like selfish reasons. I thought everyone would be angry with me, impatient. After all, I seceded, what place did I have? But when you wrote back, telling me to come homeâ€”I found that I had made the greatest mistake. You, of everyone else here, were telling me to come back, despite every awful word I said...you still wanted me to come home.

"I have changed Astrid. In someways good, and in others, bad. Either way, my old self is gone."

She sighed and nodded in understanding. She could visibly see change, inside and out, and she knew it wasn't to be avoided.

"I thought that maybe, if I brought the Outcasts as a token, maybe my father would take me back. It wasn't supposed to play out like this, Astrid. I wasn't supposed to hide my identity so long."

"Then why did you?"

He scratched his head shyly. "I was scared. You know how you reacted, I didn't know how everyone else would react."

"Does anyone else know?"

"Besides Mwaba and Toothless, no."

Astrid looked over to the slumbering dragon. "That's why he's here."

"I think he took it the hardest. I took him flying the night I came back, and he wouldn't let me go. He's been following me, even though I told him to pretend I was a stranger. I should be lucky I have such a loyal friend."

"He looked for you. Everyday, he would go flying to distance lands, sometimes not coming back for days on end. He was scared."

Hiccup looked over to his friend as well. "He doesn't need to be scared anymore."

There was a long amount of stillness before he said, "You don't need to be scared anymore either."

Astrid blurted out a cross between a sob and a laugh before resting her head on her hands.

Hiccup came and knelt in front of her, a hand tentatively resting on her knee.

Astrid was back to whispering, not wanting to hear the weakness in her voice. "I don't cry Hiccup, not for anything, or anyone. But I cried for you. I'm still crying for you. You've brought out a weakness in me I didn't know I had." She met his sympathetic gaze. "And I'm angry about it."

"I'm honored."

She narrowed her eyes.

"You cried for me. I can't explain how much I admire that." He took and held her hand, which felt petite and delicate compared to his callouses. "I'm sorry about how I treated you since I've been back. I was rude, and I'm sorry."

"I deserved it."

"I thought so at first, too." He gulped. "Mwaba said that I was bitter about everything that happened and so I took out my anger on you. I didn't mean to do itâ€|there's so much that happened in the last few months, I can't even begin to explain it."

She sensed his frustration and answered. "It's okay."

"-But, there is something very important I need you to know." He lifted her hand and kissed her knuckles. "Astrid, darling, I have never stopped loving you. If anything, my love has grown. I understand if you are angry with me now, or if you hate me. I said awful things, did awful things, andâ€|" He ducked his head. "I'm sorry."

Astrid felt more tears welling up in her eyes, as if she needed more crying.

"I'm here now. So, do with me as you see fit. Punch me, kick me, whatever you need to do. I'm yours." He spoke with his eyes closed. He waited, too, ready for the inevitable punch or slap that was to come, waiting for his head to snap back and the scent of blood to bubble in his nostrils. But it didn't. He waited even longer, for the probable kiss that usually followed her violence. That didn't come either. Instead, he was surprised by Astrid throwing her arms around his neck and crying into his chest.

"Oh godsâ€|I'm so sorry Hiccup!"

He recovered quickly and hugged her back. "No, Astrid please, you've already apologized enough. I forgive you, I promise!"

She wasn't able to respond as she was overwhelmed with sobs. Then she finally choked out. "Don't ever leave me again! I've almost lost you

twice, the next time, I'll surely die!"

"I'm not going anywhere. I promise, Astrid." He hugged her tight. "Anywhere I go, I'll let you go too."

Astrid was reduced to sobbing as she gripped him with all of her might. Her legs pressed against his sides as she fought to get close to him. Her fingers traced the scars on his back and her cheek laid upon his smooth shoulder.

"I told you you'd end up in my arms by the end of the night." He smiled.

She hit him, but it wasn't hard. "This isn't funny."

"Sorry, I just don't like seeing you cry." He pet her hair.

Finally, she pulled away, but never broke contact with him. Her fingers charted the edge of his jaw, taking in the change of shape.

Hiccup smiled back to her, touching her face as well. "You're even more beautiful then I remember." He swept her persistent bangs from her blushing face.

"As are you." She replied, dazed.

"Me? Beautiful?" He mockingly scoffed. "I could understand devilishly handsome, or even fine. But beautiful?"

"Yes," Her thumb skirted under his lids, on his cheek bones, and then dusted over his thick eyebrows. "You used to be baby faced, and had a big nose," she tapped it, "and goofy teeth," she titillated his lips. "But now you're beautiful."

"Oh great, does this mean my name is changing to 'Hiccup the Beautiful?'"

"Only if you allow me to change my name too."

The stunned look on his face was priceless, and the small 'o' shape he made with his lips was a perfect invitation for her. Astrid crashed her lips upon his, like waves upon a rocky shore, as she gripped the nape of his neck and dove into his hair. Such a tender kiss, the boy was not used to. After the initial shock of pure ecstasy, his wide eyes rolled back in his head as a sloppy smile grew on his face. His lids drooped, his shoulders relaxed, and his hand tightened on the back of her head, pulling her closer still.

She allowed herself to be overwhelmed by his embrace, his scent, his heat, his taste. She took it all in, as she had been craving him for so long, just to be with him. One thought kept popping up in her head as she fought for total surrender with his mouth. Finally, she pulled back.

"I never took it off," she whispered, her lips still against his.

"What?" he was in a foggy state of mind. Astrid thought that it would be better to permit him oxygen, just so his big brain would process

what she was saying.

"The ring you made me. From the moment you gave it to me, I never took it off."

His face was flushed, "Well, I made it for youâ€|after all."

"Yes." She grinned, nudging his nose with her own.

"Yes, what, exactly?" He was still sort of dazed.

"I will marry you."

In his jubilation, he lifted her from her seat and spun her around. "Oh Astrid! Oh you wonderful woman!" He hooked her legs around his waist and kissed her again, so elated. "I haven't been this happy since-â€|" Then he set her gently back down. "There's so much to do! I have to tell my father! No, wait, Wart has to tell my father. And then there's the bride price, no need for a dowryâ€|"

Astrid grabbed his arm and dragged him back to stand toe to toe with her. She had been taken by surprise when he had lifted her up. And now, seeing him look down on her, she was faced with the reality that Hiccup was older now. He grew up, butâ€|just that frantic little outburst was a reminder that some things never changed.

"Hold on dragon boy." Her voice was seductive as she looped her arms around his waist. "Don't I get to have some time with you before duty calls?"

"Forgive me, my lady, I seem to go stupid when I'm around you."

"Only when you're around me?"

"Always."

Everything else faded away as they were lost in each other's embraces.

11. Treasures

Axel Hofferson was a man of rigid structure. He loved his daughter deeply, but also saw her potential and raised her to be the best fighter she could be. He didn't hate Hiccup, as most people thought. The man had a respect for the boy's work in the forge. But then when the incident of the Red Death came about, then he decided that Astrid and Hiccup would one day be married. He had been so excited when the boy had come with arms full of weapons and asked, blushing madly, for Astrid's hand in marriage.

But then Astrid had to be difficult and send Hiccup off. Now he was dead. Axel Hofferson was sad. He knew that his darling daughter loved the boy, her behavior during his absence could have said enough. Despite his desire for his daughter to be married one day, he would rather her be a old woman than to marry thatâ€|

Outcast.

Oh yes, Wart made his blood boil. Like a few others, he didn't trust the new chief. And he especially didn't like the fact he humiliated Astrid in front of everyone, making her cry.

So it would be reasonable to say the man was livid when the speck of dirt on the white walls of his existence popped over the next morning, an unknown sack on his shoulder.

"Hello, Mr. Hofferson. Is Astrid here?"

"No." The man attempted to slam the door shut, but Hiccup slid his fake foot into the opening. "Well, that's odd. I escorted her home last night, and she told me to meet her to escort her to breakfast. Is she with her dragon?"

Another fishy thing about this man was whatever he had done to Astrid. The day before, right after Wart's announcement, Astrid had come home and ran up to her room. He could hear her sobbing, and it was the most painful thing he had ever faced. Just hearing his beautiful daughter suffering made his heart clench in a tender way. Eventually, she had come out and sat by the fire, wiping her eyes. Her mother asked if there was anything to do to help, he seconded that offer.

Astrid declined them both. "There's nothing that can make me better."

She had bravely stood, evidence of her sorrow all over her face, and announced, "I'm going to talk to Wart." And then left.

Axel Hofferson had sat by the back door and listened. The village was strangely quiet, most likely listening as well. Astrid was heard angrily yelling from up on the hill, but her words were warbled by the distance. Then, she went silent. The couple were quiet for too long, before laughter was heard. Then silence reined once again.

She was gone about three hours, and returned when it was late. She was smiling, tears still fresh in her eyes, but her smile was not any less genuine. When asked how it went, Astrid grinned toothily and said, "I have accepted his proposal."

Unbelievable. His little Astrid, the most stubborn, bullheaded viking on the entire island, had changed her mind on who she was going to marry within just a few hours.

Axel Hofferson glared back at this man, unwilling to answer him. Really, he wanted to deck the chief in the nose, but then there would go the treaty, and he wanted peace just as much as anyone else. He met the boy's green eyes, that looked to be smiling. The older man gave up.

"Astrid! The chief is 'ere for ya!" He called up, not too happy about it.

"Which one?" Asked the blonde.

"The one you are involved with!" He hesitated to say 'engaged' because it wasn't official yet.

She giggled. Giggled. "Be right down!" And she was, opting out of

her spiked skirt and other armor for just a simple dress.

Oh gods, she was wearing a dress. _Astrid_. What sort of black magic was this chief capable of using?

"Oh Astrid!" The mother of the girl interrupted her gallivanting. "Before you go, could you change Pippin? He's been fussin'."

"Of course!" She smiled.

Mr. Hofferson opened the door a bit more and allowed this stranger, his daughter's unofficial fiancÃ©, to come in. Wart nodded in appreciation.

The baby's crib was in the middle of the room, not too far from the fire, to keep him warm. Astrid lifted the infant and set him on the table. Hiccup watched in silent agony as she cooed right along with the babe.

"You made such a mess! Yes, you did!" All said in a sickeningly sweet voice. Children did strange things to people.

"Ma-ma!" Peregrin blubbered back, "Ma-ma!"

"That's right, mama's here." She smiled.

A distinct sniff came from the masked man, and Mr. Hofferson looked at him in question. Hiccup was missing out, another damaging effect of his decision.

"It's so touching to see such a loving bond." Wart stated, in a surprisingly calm voice.

"And you're attempting to take a mother away from that child." The father responded.

The young chief whirled on the man and stared him down. "My mother was taken from me. I could not bare to do that to someone else." In his rage, the masked voice he used slipped and Hiccup was heard.

The man didn't notice it though. He just looked at him with wide eyes and said, "You'd adopt him?"

"In a heartbeat."

"And I thought Outcast's didn't have hearts."

"They don't, but I'm not an Outcast. Not really."

The message was cryptic, but Axel Hofferson didn't have much time to think about it before Astrid lifted Pippin into a wrap and slung it over her shoulder, cradling the babe. "We need to take this little guy to the Larson's before we go. Okay?"

"Sure."

She came to the door, stood on her tip toes and kissed her father on the cheek.

"We're going to breakfast, the meeting about the finalization of the

treaty is taking place afterwards, please come, papa." She grinned.

"Fine. If you're really going through with this!" He sighed. "Why Astrid? You were so devoted to Hiccup, what in Migard made you change your mind?"

The couple looked at each other, and Astrid answered without breaking the gaze. "I have my reasons." Then she looked back to her father. "And I will always be devoted to Hiccup. I promise, this is for the best."

He was skeptical before replying. "I'll meet you up there." He then closed the door.

"I don't think your dad likes me." He said as they started walking off.

"Oh, he loves you." Astrid scoffed. "He and mom always talked about how great you were and how one day you would make a great chief, and I a great chief's wife."

"Yes, your dad liked _Hiccup_, but not me."

She seemed to understand as she 'Ah'ed.

"Maybe it's the mask."

"I think it's sexy." She stated nonchalantly.

He snorted. "I was going for intimidating, not sexy."

"I find intimidating sexy, okay?"

"Well, it's good to know I'm doing something right." The underlying meaning came to light as he was caught looking around. Everyone was staring at them. Hiccup wanted to shrink away into nothing, but Wart continued on proudly.

"When are you going to do the big reveal?" She asked.

"Oh, I wake up every morning thinking, 'today will be the day' but then I chicken out at every opportunity. So you knowâ€|never."

"Hiccup!" She whispered harshly. "You can't just not tell people! I love you, and I will still marry you, but everyone will hate me for going against my promise."

"We could just get hitched and then live on the Atolls, where I'm chief and no one would question us."

"You would do that?" She asked sadly.

"No, I've run away from this enough." He let out a heavy sigh. "I don't know what I'll do."

"You could do it during the meeting. That way it's not in front of everyone."

"Do you want my father to have a heart attack?" There was a silence and Astrid imagined him scrunching up his face behind the mask. "I can't help but feel like that would be really mean."

"It'll be mean no matter when you do it."

"Yep. Not helping me to want to do it any faster."

"Hiccup," She whispered again. "Despite what you think, everyone misses you."

He didn't respond, but put his hand in hers. They dropped off the child, and continued in silence.

In the great hall, more eyes turned to look at the couple as they sat at a table. Wart set his bag on the surface, making Astrid curious, but before she could say anything, Fishlegs came up.

"Are you free today? I would like to discuss dragon things." He asked the masked man sheepishly.

"Really? You aren't angry with me?"

"Noâ€¦you didn't kill Hiccup." He said matter-of-factly. "I feel like people don't understand that."

"Thank you Fishlegs, really, but I have a meeting with the tribal leaders today. To finalize the treaty and uhâ€¦umâ€¦Astrid's engagement."

And just like that, the entire room went silent.

Fishlegs stood open mouthed, moving his lips like, well, a fish. Then finally, "Smothering Smokebreaths! Astrid!"

"Now Fishlegs, you don't know the full story."

"Oh really?" Snotlout came over, looking very angry. "Sounds like your marrying one man while another's ring is on your finger." Ruff and Tuff came to stand with them, looking equally as peeved.

Hiccup was surprised. "I didn't know you guys were so loyal to Hiccup."

Snotlout scoffed. "Loyal to Hiccup? No. I'm talking about the fact that I've been courting Astrid before Hiccup even noticed her."

Untrue, thought the teen in question. "Oh, I seeâ€¦!" Wart rolled his eyes. "So you're angry that I cut in line?"

Snotlout poked him the chest. "I was. But then, I got over it, because it's evident that Astrid just likes guys in power. She only likes you because you're chief."

Astrid crackled her knuckles in silent rage, but Hiccup stood up calmly. In one stride, he was looming over the bully. Hiccup, _looming_! It was invigorating! "You want to run that by me again, Snotpout?" His voice was dangerously low.

"It's Snotlout."

"Lout; An awkward or stupid person, literally 'Little Snot'. Your name fits you."

"You trying to pick a fight?"

"I'm defending milady's honor. You're the one picking the fight." He cracked his shoulder.

"Oh yeah, what are you going to do about it?" And he pushed the chief.

The interest of the room was focused on the two teens as they came to a standoff.

Hiccup was lucky enough that he had thoroughly improved on his fighting skills during his enslavement. You bump into someone the wrong way, you get punched in the face. It was normal, and Hiccup soon learned to protect himself, and over time, to take down drunks and lesser sized men. He accredited it to his new height.

In any normal situation, Hiccup would have kept calm and waited for the other man to swing first. But this was not a normal situation, this was Snotlout, his cousin, and the bane of his existence. Just once he wanted to give him the butt kicking he so richly deserved. And boy, was he asking for it!

"Are you a coward?" The teen sneered. "I bet you just got this role by kissing ass."

That did it. Wart's fist collided with the stout boy's face, producing a cracking sound. Snotlout fell on his butt, his nose bleeding like a fountain. To Hiccup's surprise, no one ran to his aid, instead, they cheered. Even the twins and Fishlegs. He didn't dwell on the praise though, as he planted his false foot on his opponent's chest and pinned him to the ground.

"Listen here you vomitous mass of disgusting growth." He leaned his weight on his chest. "I have lived my entire life taking orders from others, unlike you, you garish, insignificant tick, you've had everything handed to you. I had to work, slave my life away. I've suffered more than you could possibly imagine, and yet, you have the audacity to think of me as a worm, a parasite. I take pride in my title, and I deeply care about the young woman I am engaged to. So, you impudent rat, I will not sit and listen to you insult my intelligence or my bride." Well, it wasn't a complete lie.

It was gratifying to see the larger teen, the bully of all these years, tearing up and sniveling like a brat. In Snotlout's mind, he was telling himself to refrain from crying.

"Is that understood!?" He nearly shouted.

"Y-y-yes!"

Oh goody, he was stuttering. Wart leaned off, taking his leg away. "Good. Now get up and wipe your face. You look like a toad that's been away from water too long."

"I like him," Ruffnut whispered to Astrid.

"Now, if you'll excuse me," Hiccup shakily put his arms behind his back. "I need a moment of fresh air." He nodded once and left the room.

"Woow," Tuffnut said lounging at the table. "I can see why you agreed. He seems pretty persuasive."

"Oh, he can be." Astrid grinned like a cat. "I meanâ€" he'sâ€"yes, very persuasive. But he didn't punch me in the faceâ€"or anything."

"Did he kiss you?" Asked Fishlegs.

"Notâ€"initially." She blushed.

"You kissed?!" Ruffnut placed her hands on the table and stared, wide eyed.

"But, you don't even know him!" Snotlout had apparently recovered from his attack. After all, it was pretty cool. They were all imagining the fact that Wart's mask separated, just revealing his mouth. Snotlout had the vindictive image of the chief cornering the blonde and taking advantage of her.

"Yeah, what if his face is all nasty?"

"What if he's ugly?"

"What if he's actually Dagur?!"

"There's nothing to worry aboutâ€"Iâ€"I've seen him without his mask."

The teens were all silent until Fishlegs asked in a small voice, "You know who he is?"

"Of course, he's the man I'm going to marry." Astrid replied curtly, not lying.

Ruffnut was impatient. "Okay, spill. What does he look like?"

"Oh, he's very handsome. His eyes areâ€"and his noseâ€"andâ€"his lipsâ€" She sighed.

Snotlout made a gagging sound.

Astrid shook herself out of her uncharacteristic swooning. "Behind that mask is another man entirely. He puts up a front to lead his tribe, but he is really very kind. That's rare, and I'mâ€"I'm okay with it."

The teens heard the collective sound of the 'Thunk' of a peg leg before Gobber joined in. "I was worried. I saw the chief sock Snotlout and assumed that he was running his mouth."

"He was." Tuffnut laughed. "Always entertaining when that happens."

Gobber rolled his eyes. "But to hear from Astrid's mouth that everything is okay, well, I'm glad."

The blonde looked to the mentor of the group. "You don't think I'm betraying Hiccup, do you? Because, I'm notâ€| " She tried to say desperately.

"Astrid. You are a lovely young lady, I know Hiccup would be devastated if you gave up opportunities just because he's gone." He lovingly grasped her shoulder. "Live life how you want to. If you like this man, marry him. If you're just doing it for the good of the tribe, forget it. I've seen his kindness, he wants this treaty, marriage or not."

"Gobber, Iâ€"â€|" She shyly looked back at the doors where Hiccup had entered. "I love him."

He patted her head. "That's that then."

The people dwindled and soon the Great Hall was empty, save for a handful of men and a young girl. They sat at the head table.

"Sir, are you sure this _girl_ can be here?" Savage asked, looking pointedly at Astrid.

"We are discussing the matter of her marriage and the unity of our tribes. It would be cruel to shut her out." Wart said calmly.

"So," Stoick said, "Have you reached a decision?"

Hiccup allowed Astrid to answer. "I have accepted his proposal."

Stoick nodded. "Alright then."

"Mr. Hofferson." Hiccup spoke, interrupting Stoick and the treaty. "I want you to know that I take this engagement seriously, and I know that you don't want your daughter to marry me."

The viking across the table said nothing, but pursed his lips.

"That is why I accept your sacrifice as the dowry. And for the bride priceâ€|" He reached behind him and withdrew a bag from his sack on the floor. "I hope you accept this as a down payment. There is more to come, of course." He handed the bag to the man. "I hope it helps."

The bag was fat with gold coins. "Thisâ€"this is more than we were expecting for the bride price."

"I know, but I want you to be sure that I can care for your daughter."

Mr. Hofferson accepted the prize and shook the boy's hand. "You do well to keep that promise."

Hiccup smiled behind the mask, but it went unseen.

"Sir," interrupted Savage. "That gold belongs to Alvin!"

Wart rolled his head over, acting as if he was talking to a dense child. "Very nice observation. Yes, it was Alvin's. But, since he had a funeral pyre on a boat, he can't very well be buried with it, can he?"

"No, butâ€"â€"|"

"And I am the new chief, so his money gets passed to me. And I am using it for the betterment of our tribe. Does that makes sense?"

"Y-yes sirâ€"â€"|" Savage answered, embarrassed.

"And now Stoick, the treaty. We sign to confirm it, assuring our unity."

The large chief let out a sigh. "I'll be so glad once it's signed."

"Just one more thing."

The man exasperated, but said nothing.

"This belongs to Berk." And from his bag, he extracted a book and set it on the table. The Book of Dragons that was stolen so long ago.

The group was silent as Stoick stood and came around the table. He lifted Wart from his seat and enveloped him in a hug. "Thank you."

Hiccup was smiling unbearably hard as he patted his father on the back. "Let's sign this thing!"

Later, on the hill, Hiccup was washing up. He sweated so hard in his suit, from nerves and because the leather didn't breathe. Mwaba was in the main room, scratching Toothless' head. The Zambian had taken a shining to the dragon, obviously not as much as Hiccup did, but none the less, he enjoyed the reptile's company. The man liked Berk, it was calm and peaceful and the people were friendly. Still, he had a hard time adapting. Sure, he had Hiccup to help out, but the boy couldn't give him full attention. He understood that. Maybe that's why he got along with the dragon, Toothless was trying to be invisible, but still watch over his boy.

In turn, Toothless liked the black man. He sensed that Mwaba had cared for his human when he could not. This huge man was not a viking, as he was peaceful and calm. Toothless liked it, compared to the everyday high strung, ready to attack, hoard of warriors that always surrounded him. Without introduction, Toothless and Mwaba had found friends in each other.

There was a knock at the door.

"Can you get that?" Hiccup asked from behind a curtain.

Mwaba stood and opened the door. A familiar blonde smiled back. "Good evening, Astreed." He smiled and allowed her in.

"Is Hiccup here?"

"He es preenin'" He jerked a thumb over to the curtain.

"You make me sound like a Nadder." He laughed. "Hey Pooh!" He greeted in hello, not showing himself.

"Don't you 'Pooh' me!"

Someone was in trouble.

"I thought you were going to reveal during the meeting!"

He peeked his head out from behind the curtain. "Can we talk about this when I'm not naked? I'm feeling very vulnerable right now."

She groaned. "Fine, just hurry up." And she sat heavily on the bench to await her husband to be.

Mwaba was stoking the fire, while a pot of something was boiling over it. Toothless stared at the bundle she had slung around her shoulders. She smiled back, but said nothing about it.

"Hey...Mwaba, is it?"

The man glanced up to her.

"Where are you from?"

He smiled fondly. "All de way south. As far south as yoo can imagine. I kum from a country called Zambia, es a part of Africa."

"Do you miss it?"

"Somedays I mess de climate. Es too cold heah." He sighed. "I was orphaned as a child." He looked directly to Pippin as he spoke. "I 'ad no one to care fo me, so meh chief sold me into de thrall. And dat is dat."

Astrid simpered. The sound of Hiccup ringing out a cloth and the crackling of the fire were the only sounds as the two sat in awkward silence. Finally, the blonde asked, "How did you get out?" She cleared her throat. "I mean, Hiccup told me how you two met, and then how he got outâ€|but he kind of skipped over the part where you two met up."

"My bad!" Hiccup called from his corner.

Mwaba smiled at the memory. He was working in the fields, pulling a plow like some sort of animal, when other slaves came running over. 'The chief's been killed! His replacement has asked everyone to come forward!' Curious, Mwaba followed the other slaves out to the town square, where a man in leather stood above the crowd. He announced that slavery was now outlawed, and that those in the thrall would work for pay or go free. Many of the townsfolk were outraged at this, but the leader explained the cruel conditions, and that maybe, just maybe, if the master's treated their slaves better, the workers would be willing to stay and help. He then spotted Mwaba in the crowd and ordered him to be brought forward. Ragnar would not stand for it, as he went up ranting and raving. 'I paid good money for him, he's the best worker I've ever had, I'm too old for this work.' Bla bla

bla.

It was then that Hiccup took off his helmet and looked at the man with a scowl. His previous master fell on his feet and begged for forgiveness.

'I could put you in jail.' The teen threatened. 'I could have you killed.'

But the man broke down in tears at his feet, volunteering himself as a servant to the chief as retribution. While this transpired, Mwaba stared in amazement.

Finally, the large man approached the chief and simply said, 'Jambo Kwikwi.' And the two hugged it out.

"He came fo me." The giant smiled.

The sound of a curtain swishing back got the attention of the three in the room. Hiccup was only in his pants as he toweled his hair dry.

"You can't do anything halfway," Astrid acknowledged, "I either see you completely decked out in armor, or almost naked."

Hiccup shrugged, "I have nudist tendencies."

Mwaba snorted.

The topic of his identity was forgotten as Hiccup caught sight of the clump in Astrid's arms. "Oh gods, is thatâ€|?"

She smiled. "You haven't gotten to see him yet, have you?"

He numbly shook his head as he sat next to her, holding out his hands. She gently passed him the babe, and he cradled him close. He fingered his tiny features. "He looks great. Warm, well fed, lovedâ€|"

"Hiccup." Astrid tried to console him, but Pippin began to wake up. His little green eyes flickered open as he made gurgling and babbling noises.

"Hey there, stranger. Do you remember me?" His voice was thick with tenderness.

The babe reached up and grabbed his nose. "Da-da."

A tearful laugh was the result. "Yeah, daddy! It's your daddy!" He whispered in excitement. "Did you miss me?"

"Da-da!" The baby sang again.

Hiccup lifted the boy and softly caressed his soft forehead. "Because I missed you." He kissed him. "I love you." His lips quivered and his eyes stung. "I'm sorry I was away for so long." And he hugged the babe close. "But you have a mama now."

Astrid's eyes got glassy as she fought the emotions.

Toothless slunk over to the couple and sniffed the bundle of blankets in his friend's arms. Hiccup noticed the dragon's curiosity and held out Pippin so he could see him.

"This is my son Toothless. My baby." He smiled.

In return, the black dragon gave a toothy grin and licked the top of the baby's head. He could see it now, Pippin would be spoiled rotten.

12. Retribution

A little boy with auburn trusses and bright green eyes. The son of the chief, but the smallest in the clan. Astrid was best friends with this boy, loving him for his intellect and humor, not his strength. It was at this moment, that the young woman watched as the child ran around, chasing terrors. Astrid thought it was a little odd, seeing Hiccup so young, while she stayed the same. But she didn't dwell on it, as her focus was guided back to the boy. Teary eyed, he rubbed his cheeks as the chief approached him.

"Man up son, they pick on you because you're weak." He said harshly.

Little Hiccup stood and nodded, his lips quivering.

Astrid tried to say something, but she knew, in this dream world, that her words fell on deaf ears.

She saw herself, growing taller than the boy and flicking the back of his head. She saw Snotlout trip him, Ruff and Tuff wail on him, and Fishlegs pick him up and move him out of the way. She watched in sadness as the others grew like trees, but he remained small. Snotlout grabbed his sketchbook and held it over his head, while Hiccup jumped for it, never coming near the height. Stoick sighed as he passed. Sad little Hiccup trudged by himself to the cliff face.

She always hated this part. He would stare out at sea, the wind jostling his hair and clothes. He looked back and stared at her before leaning forward and jumping. Almost instantly, his body turned to dust and was swirled by the wind.

Then he was gone.

Astrid sat up quickly in bed. It was the same dream since he left. Over and over, the same nightmare came up. The worst part was that she was there the whole time, but was unable to do anything to help. A man once said that guilt is the most toxic form of poison; didn't she know it. So she got out of bed, as she usually did after the dream, and snuck out of the house by the help of Stormfly.

After the first three days of the reoccurring nightmare, Astrid had had enough and sought out refuge. Using her stealth skills, she broke into the chief's home and slept in Hiccup's bed.

Stoick found her in the morning, and after a short discussion with her parents, she was allowed to sleep there when she needed. Tonight, however, Astrid didn't need to go to the chief's, when Hiccup was

home.

She made her way up the hill and peeked in the door. To her surprise, Hiccup was still awake, laying on his back with Pippin sleeping against his chest.

"Astrid?" He whispered, glancing over when he heard the hinges creak.

"You can't sleep either?" She asked sadly.

"No, I haven't slept well in a long time. I have awful nightmares. I call it 'post traumatic stress disorder.'"

"Well, if anyone is going to have a traumatic experience, I believe it would be you." She came and sat on the floor next to Toothless, her back resting by Hiccup's shoulder.

"And what about you?" He asked softly, playing with her hair.

"Nightmare. Same one, over and over."

"Is that why you've been sleeping in my old room?"

She looked at him. "How did you know about that?"

"I spy on you." He grinned. Hiccup slipped his free arm around her shoulders and allowed her to use his shoulder for a pillow. "You can sleep here, no one will notice."

She turned her head to the side and kissed him lightly. "Thank you." And she snuggled into his side.

She stared into the fire, still wide awake. "Hiccup?"

"Hmm?"

"Will you tell me a story?"

He snorted. "Really?"

"Just to help me sleep."

"Nope, my stories are all too action packed. You'll be awake all night."

"Then make one up."

"Fine. Okay!" He was quiet for a moment then said. "There once was a princess named Astrid."

"Wait, why am I the princess?"

"Because you're a girl!"

"So?"

He exasperated. "Fine, once upon a time there was a prince named Hiccup. He was super handsome, and everyone loved him."

Astrid turned and raised her eyebrow.

"Okay! He was super handsome, but he was klutzy, so everyone was annoyed with him. To keep him safe, his father, the King Stoick put him up in a tower, and had a dragon guard it."

"What was the name of the dragon?"

"Toothless, of course." He said matter-of-factly. Toothless trilled in his sleep. "In the kingdom, there was a brave warrior named Astrid. She was as fierce as she was beautiful, and she cared deeply about the boy locked away in the tower. She tried to reason with the king to let him out, but the king said that the dragon was too protective to get near the tower. If she wanted to rescue the prince, she would have to slay the dragon."

"She didn't though, did she?"

"What do you think?" He chuckled. "Astrid approached the dragon, and he growled at her. Astrid's heart was big, and she couldn't kill Toothless. So she talked to him." He pitched his voice high to mimic the girl. "'Excuse me dragon, the boy I love is trapped in that tower. Please let me save him.'" Then he lowered his voice. "'I have to protect the prince from everyone, King's orders.'"

"Since when does Toothless talk?"

"It's my story, I can make him do whatever I want."

"Okay." She laughed. "What happened then?"

"Well, the dragon could see the earnestness in her eyes, so he allowed her in, but followed close behind."

"Because, you know, she was so strong."

"Oh, of course." He grinned. "In the tower, she didn't find the young useless prince that she had been expecting, but instead, a strapping young man who didn't need rescuing."

"'Why are you still here?' Astrid asked curiously. He replied, 'I am not wanted there, why should I go back?' 'I came for you,' she defended. 'I want you.' So, he allowed her to save him and together they flew away on Toothless' back and lived happily ever after."

Astrid was quiet a long time, Hiccup assumed she was asleep, until she stated. "You're really bad at telling stories."

"Well, excuse me! It's all I could come up with on the fly."

"It was cute." She snuggled closer. "Especially the 'happily ever after' part."

"That part will be true in our story." He draped her hair over his shoulder. "I'll make that promise."

"You better." She yawned.

Exhaustion had it's way with her, and soon she was asleep, slumped against him.

In the morning, she blinked awake to find herself laying on the bench he had occupied last night. He was absent though.

"Habari za asubuhi, Astreed." A deep voice spoke.

The blonde sat up, a blanket falling from her form. Mwaba stoked a fire as something cooked over coals. "Where's Hiccup?"

The Zambian opened his mouth to reply, but the door burst open. A masked man carrying logs, and two water buckets hanging from his elbows came in. "Oh, Astrid! You're up!" He dumped the logs by the fire and placed the buckets off in a corner. "Just in time for breakfast." He took off his mask and smiled at her.

"Where's Pippin?" She rubbed her eyes.

"I took him to the Larson's this morning, he was fussing."

"In your mask and everything?"

"Well, yeah. Butâ€¦I did reveal to her. I know that mothers can be overprotective with children, and I didn't want my access to Pippin to be barred. So I revealed who I was and told her to keep it a secret."

She grinned. "How did she respond?"

"She fainted."

Astrid snorted. "Of course." She pulled the blanket around her shoulders, sleep still clinging to her.

"Did you sleep better last night?"

She nodded, a bit drowsy.

"We'll be married soon, so you won't have to worry about those nightmares." He came over and pecked her cheek.

"Wewe mbili kufanya mimi mgonjwa." _You two make me sick._ Mwaba joked.

"Oh, you're just jealous, you old fuddy duddy."

"When did you learn to speak his language?" Astrid asked, before yawning.

"It was an exchange. I taught him to speak Norse, and he taught me to understand Kiswahili. I'm not as good at speaking it, but I can get by."

"He es a betta student den I am. He es almost fluent." Mwaba looked in pride.

Hiccup shrugged. "I'm a fast learner." He sat next to her as Mwaba took the pot off. "I had to be, with everything that's been thrown at me over all this time. Especially with the allies coming

in."

"Allies?"

Hiccup exasperated. "The Outcast network spans farther than I could have ever imagined. Within the week that Alvin was killed, I had tribe chiefs from the Danes, the Varangians, Akkadians, Hoarders, Ostrogoths, andâ€¦" He laughed. "Dagur. That's where the mask came from. He sent word that he was coming, and I made it up. I used the skills that my dad had been teaching me and delegated the meets with each of them, some of them at the same time. I strengthened our bonds, but told of the changes we were making. Luckily, most of them found the idea of the blood thirsty tribe turning to peace as a good thing. Except Dagur, there's just no pleasing that kid." He sighed as Mwaba handed him and Astrid bowl. "Ah, thank you. And the other thing I had to deal with were the traders. We have Johan, who is our only trader, but the Outcasts, have four others. I'm going to try to get them to come here too, because it's amazing the stuff that they trade. We have two from Rome, like the capital city, then we have one from Persia, he has lots of spices and herbs, and then, my favorite, Maoyi Shang from Seres."

"Seres? I've never heard of thatâ€¦"

"I didn't until he came. He's a very small man with narrow eyes and dark complexion, though, not as dark as Mwaba. Somewhere in the middle. He comes from a land on the opposite side of the world. He trades silk, ink, a thin ceramic called porcelain, and a green jewel called Jade. Here!" And he went to a chest in the corner of the room. "I thought it would be perfect for me, so I got it!" Excitedly, he took out a tiny hand carved statue of a dragon, but it was unlike one she had ever seen before. "This is called a Feilong, it's what their dragons are like. In their culture, dragons are revered and looked upon as a sign of luck and power."

"Boy, were you born in the wrong place." She laughed.

"No kidding! They even have this phrase, xiwang ni erzi hui bian cheng long, which means 'hoping your son will become a dragon', or that you'll be successful in life."

"That's cool!" She took the little statue and examined it. "We'll have to visit someday. Just take Toothless and Stormfly on a long trip."

"That would be fun." He smiled tenderly at her. "Oh! I have to show you this knife I got from the Persians!"

"I thought you said you didn't bring any weapons." She narrowed her eyes.

"Wellâ€¦this is a decorative knife. Totally different." He scavenged around in the chest again before producing a 'Ah-ha!' and a sheathed knife. He handed it to her carefully.

"Hiccupâ€¦" Her breath was in her throat. It was one of the most beautiful pieces she had ever seen, and she did love her weapons!

"It's for you." He smiled.

"What? No!"

"I got it for you. It has you all over it!"

"You know I'm an axe girl."

"I know, but this is special. Look, the hilt has these blue stones in it, they're called lapis lazuli, and they remind me of your eyes. The blade is gold, like your hair. These black stones that frame the outside are called Onyx, and they remind of your cold resolve and determination."

She blushed. Only Hiccup could do that to her. "And what of these red stones?"

"Jasper, and they remind me of your lips!" He faded off and leaned in to initiate a kiss.

Suddenly, the door opened. "Sir!"

It was Savage.

"Do you ever knock?" Hiccup asked calmly. Then he leaned over and whispered to Astrid. "He doesn't know my identity either, don't say anything about it."

"Sir, I need to talk to you about our departure."

"You're leaving?" Asked Astrid, suddenly deflating.

"No, oh no, Pooh!" He touched her shoulder.

"Wait, we aren't leaving?" Asked Savage.

"No, you are. Argh! Sit down, soldier!"

Savage obediently took a seat and Mwaba handed him a bowl.

"Now, no Astrid, I personally am not leaving, as I have a wedding to plan. The rest of my men are going back to Outcast island to gather supplies, and what not. I'm sending Mwaba in my stead as delegate."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about, sir. It's not that I don't think the general is incompetent, but don't you think that I would be better suited for this job?"

"I have already given clear instructions on what he is to do, and he is fine with it."

"Yes, but sir, the man doesn't even speak properly."

Mwaba looked up at the man with hurt all over his face. "I doubt I was doing a pretty good job at it." He pouted.

"Now, look what you did Savage, you made a grown man cry."

"Sir! He doesn't know all the protocol! I have experience with this matter!"

"Experience doesn't matter right now, I trust Mwaba with my life, and that is what makes him a great general. He follows my orders, and doesn't talk back. Is that clear?"

Savage sneered at the boy. "Yes sir."

"Tell the men that you set sail as soon as the ships are ready. It's best to get there before sundown."

Savage stood, not even touching the food that had been offered, and left without a word.

Astrid clenched Hiccup's hand. "I don't trust him."

"I don't either, that's why I demoted him."

"His Moostache is goofeh." Mwaba added, eating his food. Hiccup snorted.

"Well, we better get down to breakfast."

"What? Why? Isn't this breakfast?" Astrid gestured to her bowl.

"Yes, we won't be eating. We'll be much too busy deflecting questions."

"Oh no, you don't meanâ€¦"

â€¦"

The couple stood in front of the crowd in the great hall. Stoick had gathered everyone, saying he had an important announcement. Astrid snuck her hand into his, ready for the wave of discontent.

"Everyone, it is official! In two weeks time, we will have the wedding of these two young kids!" He put his hands on both shoulders to show his blessing. Hiccup was smiling behind his mask, but it obviously went unseen.

The crowd gasped. Some scowled at the boy, others clapped, a still others were confused.

"I know there is question to this unity, but I think this marriage is the right thing." Stoick added.

Astrid attempted to smile, when Hiccup bumped his head into hers with a thump. He snickered.

"What's so funny?" she whispered back.

"I tried to kiss your forehead, but I forgot I had my helmet on."

Then, she genuinely did smile and put an arm around his waist. The people would be so elated when they found out who he really was, but for now, she would enjoy the fact she was finally getting to marry Hiccup.

Because he loved her, and because he wanted her, not because anyone was demanding it.

An hour later found Wart at the docks, with Astrid, Stoick, and Gobber, helping with the final preparations for the trip. Other Berkians were packing food and supplies for the warriors, and it warmed Hiccup's heart to see Berk and the Outcast's finally at peace. He shook hands with all of his men, thanking them for their service and wishing them safe travels. Then it came to saying goodbye to Mwaba.

"Yoo stay safe." The man said pointedly.

"I'm not completely helpless." Shrugged Hiccup. "I'll be fine. See you in two weeks?"

"An' mess yur wedding?" He asked with a grin.

Hiccup chuckled and held his hand out for a shake. Mwaba gripped it, but then pulled him up for a big hug, cracking his back.

"Nitakuwa miss wewe, Kwikwi."

"I'll miss you too Mwaba."

Toothless approached the group curiously and quietly. Mwaba went and gently scratched his nose. "Kuendelea naye salama." _Keep him safe_.

Finally, Savage gripped his shoulder. "Sir, there is something I need to say before I leave. Over here in private?" He jabbed his thumb back to the ramp.

Wart shrugged. "Sure."

Once they were out of earshot, Savage held out his hand. "You've done the tribe well. It's been an honor."

"Likewise." Hiccup gripped his hand.

"One more thing." And Savage pulled him closer, for a hug. Hiccup heard a distinct 'shik' sound before Savage whispered. "I hate you."

There was a tightness in his abs, as something didn't feel right, but his armor was tight anyway, so he couldn't tell exactly what it was.

"I didn't kill Alvin for some child-slave to come in a take what was destined to be mine. I was waiting for that oaf to leave your side, so I could finish the job, but I guess that wasn't happening. I wished this could have gone over better, Hiccup."

What was this man talking about? Before he had the chance to even process what was happening, a black blur lifted Savage away and the two went rolling. He heard Toothless' angry roar, the same one he had blasted the day they met, and Savage's feminine shriek of terror.

Then he heard footsteps clamoring up the ramp as Astrid shouted 'NO!' over and over and Mwaba cried 'Kwikwi!'

What was all the fuss? As if he was in slow motion, Hiccup looked down to his abs and felt his breath leave him like a vapor of smoke in the wind.

The hilt of a dagger was jutting out from his stomach.

Oh.

There would be blood, but not until they removed his armor. For that, he was thankful. Then, like a blossoming flower, a sea of tremors raked his body. His jaw shook as his lungs fought for air.

There's no wayâ€|

He watched as his friends came running. But the world started to tilt underneath him. Gently, the land moved out of his gaze as he met the bright blue of the sky. There was the cliff face, ah, he was falling. Soon, he would hit the ground. The shock overwhelmed him like a clanging gong. His breath was erratic, fighting, and missing.

Toothless. He had to focus on something to give him comfort, and Toothless was the best for that. The black dragon with so much emotion but no words. So loyal, and so full of love. Hiccup imagined the smooth scales on his hand, wings eclipsing him in a safe haven as he had all those years ago. Then the safety of the beast under him as he climbed higher and higher into the sky. Yes, up to the clouds, pass the sun, up into the stars. Toothless kept going, but he felt himself slip off and start to fall back to earth.

Gentle hands reached out and cradled him as he fell back. Loyal friends that would always be there for him. They were talking, but he didn't understand any of it.

It was like a Monstrous Nightmare suddenly woke up inside of him. Pain radiated from the wound, bubbling up like a violent torrent of molten iron. It flowed forth, till he writhed with pain up to his fingertips. He gurgled, tasting iron on his tongue.

More talking. They were talking to him. His gloves were removed and he felt skin on his palms. He was lifted carefully, the sky moving in his watery gaze.

Odin help meâ€|

â€"

Astrid kept her eye on the duo when they went up on that ramp. Hiccup thought the man was untrustworthy, but also harmless. Astrid held different opinions. It was curious enough when Savage pulled him into a hug, but when she saw Toothless suddenly look up and whirl around, she knew something was wrong. It wasn't until the dragon tackled the man that she noticed the handle in his stomach. Mwaba seemed to notice it too as he shouted for his friend the same time she did. It was as if Hiccup didn't even notice he had been wounded, but when he did, he fell backwards. Luckily, the two got to him before he hurt himself.

"It's going to be okay, we're going to get some help." She heard herself say.

His strained breath was the only reply.

"Stay wid us!" Mwaba shouted, lifting the boy into his arms.

Stoick was on the job, as Savage was already in custody. "Put him in the jail. Post men to guard him. He doesn't eat tonight!" He snapped.

One man from the Outcasts and one from Berk held fast to the man and roughly carried him away to the academy. She even overheard one of the other men say, "Stupid, why would he do that?"

"Astrid, get him to GoÃ°i's!"

She nodded once and called for Toothless. His attention was taken from the perpetuator to his dear friend and he ran to Astrid. She mounted him quickly before Mwaba handed Hiccup up to her. Then, she was off.

The ride was short, but familiar. It was just like the ride back from the incident with the Red Death. Then, he had lost his leg, and almost died, this time, she would be utterly pissed if he keeled over from an assassination attempt. Regardless, she was very afraid for her love, and held him close. "Don't you dare die on me."

At GoÃ°i's, the elder was waiting for them, remarkably. Toothless landed on the elder's porch and Astrid slid off. The dragon was led inside and leaned ever so carefully so that Hiccup slid off onto a mat on the floor. Astrid busied herself making her love comfortable, despite the grunts and groans he was making. Toothless curled protectively around his injured human.

GoÃ°i set out supplies next to the boy, and gestured at the knife. If any type of treatment was going to be done, the knife had to go, and Astrid knew she would be the one pulling it out.

She was just thankful that he was unconscious.

13. Cherished

Stoick rubbed a hand down his face in frustration.

"What a mess!" Gobber voiced his thoughts.

"Aye," he looked over the Outcast men who looked unsure of what to do. "Who'd have thought it'd come to this?" He spoke up. "My friends, I don't know what the plans are, but you are welcome to stay here until we find out."

Mwaba returned to the group, his eyes teary. "We steh just long enough da find out what de chief wants us da do."

The men nodded and began to unpack the ship. Berk men helped.

"Dontcha think it's interestin' how protective Toothless was?" Gobber asked.

"I wasn't thinking about it."

"Well, you should."

"Gobber, the chief of the tribe we just came to peace with got stabbed by his general. The last thing I'm thinking about is the behavior of my son's dragon."

"If you're worried about Spitelout, I'm sure if he was going to kill you, he would have done it by now."

"Oh that just instills me with confidence." He began to make his way up the ramp, seeing the work under way. "Besides, if you wanted me to analyze Toothless' behavior, we can say that he has been so influenced by Hiccup, that he hates any kind of violence."

Gobber gave him a funny look. "You don't actually think that, do you?"

"What are you trying to say?"

"Well, I think you're turnin' a blind eye to a possibility in an effort to not be disappointed."

Stoick shook his head and hurried up the ramp. "I think you're getting your hopes up in an impossibility."

"So you're doubtin' all evidence?"

Stoick came closer and spoke in a hushed voice. "You think that Wart is Hiccup?"

"I'm fairly certain."

"Have you been paying attention? This man is the leader of the Outcasts. Before that, he was a slave."

"How long was he in slavery?"

"I don't know, a long time."

"And a long time could be many years or a few months."

"But this man is so much bigger then Hiccup."

"Growth spurt."

"He acts different."

"You would too if you went through what he did."

"He has two legs!"

"I don't have an answer for that."

"Ha! You're just hoping that he's coming back!"

"Aren't you?"

"Iâ€œ..." Stoick stopped and swallowed. "What makes you so sure?"

"That boy 'as a way with metal and leather craft, did you see the chief's suit?"

"He may not have made that himself."

"He hasn't shown his identity."

"He already explained that, and even so, maybe he has other reasons. Maybe a scar or something."

Gobber nodded his head, agreeing to an extent. "Well, Toothless let him pet him."

"But if he was Hiccup, Toothless would have tackled him. You've seen him do it before."

"I didn't think about that."

"I'll admit, there is evidence that he is Hiccup, but that doesn't explain why he would have gone this long without revealing himself to us."

"I think Astrid knows. She said she loved Wart."

"What? But..." The wheels were turning in his head. "You really think it could be?"

"Why else have we been arguin' this whole time? I'm sure!"

"Then why hide this long?!"

"Revenge!" Gobber shook his fist.

"Really?" The chief deadpanned. "You do realize we're talking about my son, right? Not a single mean bone in his body?"

"Yeah, but he was pretty angry when he left."

"I don't think it would be revengeâ€œ|besides, this is all speculation. If Wart really was Hiccup, why would he say he was dead?"

"I don't have an answer for that either." He scratched his beard. "Here, lets do this. We'll go up and see if we can catch a glimpse of Wart's face without his mask on, then we'll know for sure if it's him. If it is, then, well, answers will come someday. We can't begin to know why he he did all this."

"That is true. Even if Wart isn't really Hiccup, we still have a responsibility to his tribe to help as much as we can. He was injured on our land."

By this time they had reached the square, where people were looking at them with curiosity. "Stoick! what's happened to the chief?" A woman called.

Word sure did travel fast. "An accident. Don't worry about it."

"Is he going to be okay?"

"He'll be fine." A deep baritone spoke from behind them. Mwaba was coming up from the docks as well, a chest over his shoulder. "He won't let dis get him. Not wid everyting he has gone tru." He met the chief and clapped his arm. "We tank yoo for taking control of de sit'a'ion."

"I would want your tribe to do the same for me." Stoick returned the gesture.

Then Gobber spoke up. "Uh, Mwaba, we were wonderin'â€|well, I was wonderin'â€|do you know who Wart is? Like, under the mask?"

"A brave youn' man, deservin' more credit den given." He spoke solemnly.

Gobber gulped. "Well, ah...could ya tell us what 'e looks like?"

"I'm not at liberdy ta tell. Let us go."

The three headed up to GoÃ°i's, where the elder beckoned Mwaba to come, but the others to stay. The two Vikings sat waiting, before Stoick got impatient and started coming up the stairs.

"I can't just sit around here. I have to know!" He took three steps before GoÃ°i cut him off. She tossed him Wart's helmet and a rag.

"What am I supposed to do with this?!" He scowled indignantly.

She responded by throwing down the slashed jacket and a rag to Gobber, and pointed harshly to both of them.

Upon further examination, blood was clinging to the leather, and her suggestion was to clean them up. The men obliged silently, feeling guilty about throwing weight around.

It seemed like hours passed in minutes as they sat stiffly, waiting for a word of good. Instead, Wart's screams of pain echoed in the house.

"I sure hope the lad pulls through." Gobber said, finishing his cleaning job.

"As do I, for many reasons." As he said this, Astrid came down with a stricken look on her face. "What do you need lass?"

"Water. He needs water."

"I'll get it." Gobber stood, took the bucket from her, and went out hurriedly to the well.

Astrid took a moment to compose herself and catch her breath.

"Are you okay?" The chief asked.

"There's so much blood." She whispered.

Stoick came to her and grasped her shoulders. "Astrid, you're a viking. You've seen blood before, and in this life style, you will see much more. Just think about when Hiccup lost his leg! You traveled all those miles with him and his bloodied leg."

"This is different!" She pleaded. "I didn't have to operate on Hiccup, and he was unconscious for most of the ride back! I didn't have to look at it, or even touch it!"

As she said it, Stoick noticed that her hands were stained red, but it looked as though she had wiped off the excess.

"Oh." He sighed. "How does it look?"

She shook her head. "Not good. The knife hit something, and Hi—" he won't stop bleeding."

"I'm sure once Goñi patches the wound, he'll be fine."

"I just—I can't look at him. Not right now. I need a moment."

Stoick went back to his seat and tossed Wart's helmet to her. She caught it and hugged the leather to her chest.

"So, you're really okay with marrying this man?" Stoick attempted conversation.

She offered a sardonic smile. "I've been asked that question too many times, sir."

"Then I would think you would have an answer for it."

She bit her lip and replied. "I guess you had a great deal to do with it."

"Me? What did I do?"

"You told Hiccup to get a bride, and in turn he asked me. That was almost a year ago."

"Right."

"From the moment he asked me, the thought of marriage had been tumbling in my mind. Sure, somewhere deep down I figured I would marry Hiccup someday, but later in life. When he asked me, I was still a girl, a child. I wasn't ready to be married. But then, after all this time, I kept thinking about it over and over, and now I'm ready. I hope."

"So—you're just marrying him because you want to get married?" Stoick asked, startled.

"No. It's—" hard to say exactly." Really, it was, without revealing his secret. She debated with herself, whether she should tell or not, Hiccup was injured, and Stoick had a right to know—and yet, it was not her place. "He loves me, sir." She confessed.

"But do you love him? Truly? Lass, vikings rarely get to marry the ones they love, my wife didn't. I just want to make sure you aren't forcing yourself to love this man in an effort to quell what you felt for Hiccup. He deserved you. He loved you." He stated.

"Chief, I promise you, I have made poor decisions, and I have had my doubts, but marrying that young man is the surest and sanest thing I can do."

The man digested all of this information and then replied. "You know you can divorce him at any time."

"I won't. You'll see."

"Astrid." Stoick spoke firmly. Their eyes met, and Astrid became painfully aware that Hiccup had his father's eyes. "Is he really Hiccup?"

Her eyes widened. "What gave you that idea?"

"You." His gaze was hard. "And Gobber, but that's not the point. Tell me, lass."

She couldn't. Her lips wouldn't let her.

Fortunately, she was saved by a loud thump and Mwaba's call, "Astreed! We need yoo!"

She clamored up the steps. As soon as she was out of sight, Stoick heard ferocious shouts of pain and agony from the loft. It left a sinking feeling in his gut and he sat heavily back down to await the fate of the young chief.

His unknown son.

Night fell and Hiccup had not yet woken up. His brows were furrowed and he sweated profusely. Toothless kept his head tucked snugly by his rider's neck while Astrid sat glued to the wall.

Mwaba climbed stairs and greeted her. "Gobber went ta get Kingsfoil for his fever."

"How's the chief?"

"He still sits an' waits. He 'as asked me how he es doin'."

"Mwabaâ€¦I'm scared." She admitted sheepishly.

"No need ta be. He 'as reason ta fight. And the last time he was stabbed, he was en a coma for tree days. Dis es notin'."

Her eyes were large as she replied, "The last time?"

"Yep, right en da face. I tink et was on da left side."

Astrid curiously examined his face, finding only smalls scars, then by his ear, the edge of a scar was visible, hiding under his hair. She combed it back to find a mark about the width of a toothpick

spanning from the level of his eye to his hairline.

"How did that happen?" She gazed up to him in worry.

"Dagur asked for a duel, and said that it was customary when he visited da Outcasts. Kwikwi took en no weapons, and dealt no blows. He dodged all of Dagur's attacks, until de snake snuck a knife from behind his back and struck him en da face. De chief didn't even notice at first, but when he did, he took the weapon out and cut off Dagur's braid."

Astrid sat with her mouth open, stricken.

"He got Dagur's respect from dat at least."

Astrid watched in concern as Hiccup fought internally. His eyebrows twitched and his lips quivered.

"He's never been a fighter." She stated, pushing his bangs away from his forehead. "As long as I've ever known him, he's always been a pacifist. I'm just impressed that he can hold his own. I still think of him as the little shrimp that I have to protect. I can still hear him screaming like a girl as he's chased through the village by a Monstrous Nightmare."

"Dat was before he tamed Toothless?"

"Yes. But not long before." Astrid took a rag from a bucket, rung it out, and placed it on his forehead. "He's never been tough, never been a fighter. So, you can see why I'mâ€¦" She pursed her lips as the term refrained from coming forth.

"He has changed though, Astreed." He patted her head in comfort and then stood. "Et es getting late. I will go check on my men. Yoo should get some sleep, Astreed."

"Thank you, Mwaba, but I won't leave his side."

"I seeâ€¦|usiku mwema." And he left.

Astrid was exhausted, but she didn't want the giant to know. Grief had sucked whatever energy she had left after she had held his shoulders back as GoÃ°i had sewn up his wound. The girl had shed many tears as the boy squirmed and cried out in pain. It was something that would plague her forever.

She settled down so she laid mere inches from his side. Gingerly, she kissed Hiccup's cheek. "Please wake up."

â€¦"

Day break. A warm breeze caressed her cheek. Astrid blinked to wakefulness, only to find her hand resting on Hiccup's scalp, her fingers entangled in his hempen locks. She smiled, enjoying the idea of waking up next to him.

"Good morning," she whispered.

He did not respond.

Shaking the sleep from her eyes, she took him in. His ivory skin was pasty and bluish, his chest rose and fell erratically with each labored breath. He had gotten worse.

"Hiccup," she shook him. "Hiccup!" Still he didn't stir, but he let out a childlike whine from deep in his chest.

Terrified, she raised the blankets to check on his wound. The skin around the stitches was red and irritated. Pus emitted from the slash along with an ungodly smell.

Infection.

"GoÃ°i! Help!" Astrid screamed.

At her shout, the dragon in the corner perked up and peered over to his friend. Worried, he nudged his head under his master's acting as a pillow. The girl thundered down the steps and searched the room. The elder was brewing something over a fire.

"The wound is infected." She stated with a heavy breath.

Her attention was redirected as Stoick woke up from the chair he had been sitting in last night.

"What? What happened?" He sat up in attention.

She ignored him as she continued with GoÃ°i. "Wart's not getting any better."

The old woman was already on the task as she drew up a bowl of some foul smelling liquid. Quickly, she made her way up the stairs, Astrid hot in pursuit.

Stoick was left at the main floor, in morbid curiosity. He moved the chair that he had previously occupied and sat by the stairs, straining his ears to listen for any indication to the boy's condition.

All that was heard was mute sounds of agony from the injured chief, and muffled sounds from Astrid. Soon, there was silence followed by scratching.

"Nothing more we can do? What does that mean?! I can't wait anymore!" Astrid shouted.

GoÃ°i came down the stairs, a pained look on her face. She shook her head.

From the loft, Stoick heard Astrid talking to him, even as he slept.

"Please get better...you promised me you would take me with you, don't go anywhere I can't follow..."

Stoick's hand reached out for the railing in a feeble attempt to console the young girl. In a moment of reckless abandon, he trudged up the stairs, not caring if the young man behind the mask was Hiccup or not, it didn't matter. Not right now.

That's what he had told himself the entire time he had climbed the stairs, but it was a different matter once he reached the threshold.

There, on the floor, lay the son who had died. The son who had always been a thorn in his side, always messed up, and even sacrificed his well being for everyone else. The son that had suddenly grown up to hate his father and flee in anguish. That son reclined battered and beaten, skinny and frail, covered in scars and the most terrifying of all...

A man.

A man that controlled a nation, that had vanquished his enemy, and a man that had come home from all his responsibilities to pay a debt to those who scorned him. Stoick was in that list of people that had harmed him, and yet he came back. A myriad of emotions flooded the chief in that single solitary moment. Guilt, sadness, happiness, pride, hurt, remorse...but above all:

Anger.

"Hiccup." He breathed.

Astrid met his enlarged eyes with her teary ones. "Stoick..."

"You knew this the whole time?" His voice was even and harsh.

"I promised him..."

"I'm his father, gods damn it!" He punched the nearest beam. "Does that count for nothing now?!"

"Please sir, he was scared."

In a few steps, the massive man was leering over the boy and snatched his son's shoulders, pulling him off the ground, and shook him, Hiccup's head lolling back. "Wake up you lying bastard! Open your eyes and face me like a man! Don't you dare leave me!"

"Chief stop!" Astrid grabbed his arm. "You're making it worse!"

Toothless growled as well, tugging on the man's sleeve to get him to release the boy.

"I want answers! I need answers, damn it!"

"YOUR SON IS DYING! This is not about you!"

"Then you tell me!" He turned on her, boring his all too familiar eyes on her. "What was he so scared of that he had to hide his identity from me? From everyone?!"

Shaking, she took her husband-to-be away from the enraged man and laid him back on the mat. Without leaving his side, she looked up at Stoick with a borrowed austere expression. "He was afraid of you."

Hiccup's father took a deliberate step back, a knot in his

stomach.

"He was afraid of your anger, my anger; he thought we would all turn him away since he seceded. He made the Outcast pact for you. He wanted so badly to make up his failures to you, Stoick."

The chief looked away to the beautiful face addressing him.

"Hasn't he proven that he's just enough of a Viking as you? As everyone else? Why can't you just let him be?"

Stoick said nothing as his nostrils flared. He had no reply, but only sneered. He was just so angry!

He turned on his heel and began to leave.

"Stoick, where are you going?"

"Goodnight Astrid." He said pointedly.

The girl wasn't sure, but she felt a distinct chill up her spine, and a fear in her heart for Savage. Of course, she wanted to kill the scoundrel, but if it was up to Stoick, no doubt his death would be long and torturous.

14. Restoration

The icy grip of death was more than Hiccup could deal with. He assumed that everything would be warm and inviting when he got to Valhalla, not a frozen wasteland. The chilling thought of actually ending up in Niflheim made him uneasy. Oh, what would he have done to deserve that?!

Through the snow, Hiccup made out a large wooden door carved into the mountain side. He approached the magnificent piece and stared at the massive panels, encrusted with bronze quatrefoils, each immaculately emblazoned with stories of old.

He knocked with hesitation.

The huge doors rolled open, and from inside burned the sweet smell of bread and wine. Light poured out, washing his face and warming his skin.

A man stood at the door. A helmet upon his head, decorated with not horns, but wings. His mighty beard was white and his armor was fashioned with jewels and precious metals. One eye scrutinized the boy, as the other lay hidden behind a patch.

"Odin?" Hiccup asked meekly.

The god smiled at him before raising his arms. "Hiccup! My son! Welcome!"

"So I have died," he stated, his shoulders sinking.

The king moved aside and whisked the young warrior inside. This hall was grand. The walls of gold, lined with silver, and alight with diamonds.

A hand fell on his back and guided him down another hall.

"For years, your people have been at odds with the dragons. These magnificent creatures that are gifts of Tyr." Odin gestured to a tapestry that lined the walls. Ornate detail was given to the warriors represented on the wall, along with accomplishments. Hiccup knew the stories of all these men well, as his father told them all to him as a child.

"All of the greatest men that have lived on the earth are shown here, Hiccup. The ones that ended wars, the victors in impossible situations, even the smallest betterments. All these men have a seat at my table." He stopped him. "The greatest of them all is in this room."

Hiccup's eyebrows rose as he was guided to the end of the tapestry, where a tall figure was painted, proud and victorious, and...old. "I don't understand, this isn't me..."

"Not yet." The king pointed to the list under the figure, where only half of the words were legible. "This is what you will look like when you reach your greatest achievement. What it is, I cannot tell."

"So...I can't be dead..." He stared to smile.

"No, only mostly dead." The king smirked. "You've been here once before, when you were mostly dead, and I gave you the same speech that I give now. You will not remember it when you go back to the mortal world."

"Then why tell me at all?"

The giant laughed. "Why indeed!" Then he turned somber. "You need a reason to want to live. You've got friends, family, and now, you know you will do great things to come."

Hiccup looked up at the king, unsure of what to do with this information.

"Hiccup, this is only a dream, induced by raging fever and overwhelming pain. Pain that you have been through only once."

"When I lost my leg." Hiccup finished.

"Yes, I brought you here then as well, to avoid it all. You'll need comfort, something from far back in your mind."

He opened his mouth to retort before Odin finished, "Astrid and Toothless are on the surface. We need a memory to help."

Odin guided him along the long hallway, pass pottery and other expertly crafted artworks, until they reached a room on the far end.

"You have a visitor." The king spoke into the dim room.

A figure sat by the fire, the only light in the room, rocking slowly with sewing in her hand. She turned and looked at the duo who had

come.

Hiccup suddenly felt very small and vulnerable.

She was how he remembered her. Strong and mighty, but not without grace and poise. Her rich sandstone hair was braided back, framing her tan face and high cheek bones. Her leaf green eyes, like his, were large and brilliant.

"Hello, Hiccup." She said tenderly, her voice soft like silk.

"â€|Mom?"

She held out her arms to him. "Don't be shy."

He ran to her and hugged her close. "Mom!" Unable to hold anything back, he wept against her. "I miss you." He spoke just above a whisper.

"I'm sorry." She smoothed his hair. "I didn't mean to go, no one ever plans that. Your father is a good man, but he doesn't always know how to show his love." But then she smiled as she pulled him to sit on her lap. "I like Astrid, and I love Toothless. You have some pretty astounding friends."

He curled against her; seeking comfort that was promised. "I'm hurt, mom."

"I know."

"I've been lying to everyone."

"I know."

"I'm so lost."

"It's okay." She cradled his head to her chest and tucked his legs around her. It was if he was just a boy all over again, slight in size and cowardly in nature.

"Do you remember those nightmares about dragons I used to have?" He whispered.

"Yes." She smiled tenderly. "You would climb into bed with us and demand protection."

"Then you would carry me back to bed, saying that you would always protect me."

"Then I would gather you up into my arms, just like this."

"And sing that lullaby."

"I remember."

She rocked him back and forth and started to sing to him. An aria from so long ago.

"Baby mine, don't you cry."

Baby mine, dry your eyes.

Rest your head close to my heart,

Never to part, baby of mine."

Her voice was sweet like honey. Her hands, callous as ever, held a soothing touch.

"Little one, when you play,

Don't you mind what they say.

Let your eyes sparkle and shine,

never a tear, baby of mine.

If they knew all about you,

they'd end up loving you too.

All those same people who scold you,

What they'd give just for the right to hold you.

From your head down to your toes,

You're not much, goodness knows.

But, you're so precious to me,

Sweet as can be, baby of mine."

"Mom..." He whispered against her, unable to say anything else.

"Hush, my son." She kissed his head as he slowly drifted off.

"I want to stay here with you." He whispered.

"Now, if you do that, you won't be able to go back. Is that what you want?"

His eyes, filled with a childlike innocence, looked up to his mother. Memories of childhood surfaced, as he remembered all of her stories of bravery and sacrifice. This place was a paradise, but home was far away. Odin's words rang strong in his ears.

You will do great things.

"I have to go back."

"It won't last forever. Someday, everyone will be together. But until then, you must be the best man you can be, and carry on."

He nodded against her as he buried himself further into her shoulder.

"And never forget, I love you." Her hand danced through his tresses

as his consciousness entered a limbo. "_And I'm so proud of you_."

The light singing sound of a wind chime was the first thing he heard, the first indication that he was alive. He moved his fingers and toes, counting his appendages. All accounted for, well, by his standards. One hand rested against fur, the other on cold, moving scales. A smile split over his face. Slowly, he cracked open his crusty eyes to take in his surroundings. His hand had rested on Toothless' snout, the reptile was awake and wide-eyed, but was trying very hard to stay still. He scratched his nose, a gesture to appease the ever growing excitement in the reptile. The dragon curled all the way around him, until his tail rested near the boy's good foot.

It was then that Hiccup realized he slept on a pillow, soft, but not like the feather one he was used to. Craning his head back, he discovered that his head was actually resting on Astrid's lap. Toothless was frozen because she slumped against him. He grinned and reached over. As soon as his hand touched her face, she sat up straight in surprise. The blonde recovered quickly and caught his hand. Lovingly, she looked over him and cupped his grizzly face.

"I know your face." His voice was soft, almost nonexistent.

Her's was just as tender. "You made me cry again."

"I'm sorry." He smiled wistfully. "I think I'm out of people that want to kill me now."

"We can only hope." Unwilling to tell him the discovery his father made last night.

He looked at her with wide eyes. "Aren't you a shining ray of sunshine!"

"I didn't mean it." She smiled. Carefully, she leaned forward and kissed him affectionately, in a way that made his head buzz and his toes curl.

"I will never get tired of that."

"I hope not." She grinned. "Don't you do that again." She scolded. "Scared me half to death."

"I know."

"No, you don't." She insisted. She wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him possessively, cradling his head against her chest. "You need to quit this habit of dying. It's freaking me out."

"I promise you, I don't do it intentionally."

"Still, be more careful okay?" Her eyes strayed down to his torso where tell-tale signs of his recklessness manifested his skin.

He sighed as he patted her arms.

"You don't still feel like that, do you?"

"Hmm?" He asked confused, as once again, she was being

vague.

"Likeâ€¦you still want to...die?" Her voice was shaking ever so slightly, but he didn't miss it.

"Why would I want a thing like that?" He looked up at her with a tender smile. "I have no fear in death, but I will not give up the gift of life that I have been given, especially now that I am able to treasure it."

"I love you." She kissed the crown of his head. "I will make that known until the day I die."

"And I love you."

There was a knock on the post by the stairs and the couple turned to look.

"I hope I em not interrui'tin'." Mwaba smiled.

Hiccup strained to sit up, his muscles burning. "Nothing you haven't seen before." He joked. Astrid leaned against him to help counter his balance.

"'Ere, I daught you might want des." He tossed him a soft green shirt and his helmet. "I ran into de chief coming tru town, said he'd be up to visit soon."

"Good thing you got here first then." He stuck his arms through the sleeves as Astrid pulled down the back for him, thankful to hide his scars.

"How are yoo feelin'?"

"Ugh, I feel like I was punched in the stomach, recently. How long was I asleep?" The question finally entered his mind.

"Two days." Said Astrid.

"Huh, only two? Not bad."

"At least not as bad as the Red Death incident." Astrid rolled her eyes, and then added in. "Or your fight with Dagur."

"Ha, you heard about that?"

"Going into a fight with a deranged murderer, and you don't bring a weapon? I'll never understand your methods."

"It worked, didn't it?"

"Thank Odin's skivvies." She mumbled.

A loud rumble broke into the conversation, grabbing their attention.

Hiccup looked to Toothless, who had wide, dilated eyes. "Was that you?" He chuckled.

"He's been with you the whole time, I suppose he would be

hungry."

"Aw, I'm sorry, Toothless! You must be starving!"

"I can get him some food." Mwaba raised.

"Go on Bud, I'll be fine."

The dragon uncurled from behind his back. Before he left, he made sure to give his best friend a sound lick across the face, and then went out onto the porch. Despite the friendship developed between the giant and dragon, Mwaba still refused to ride on Toothless. So the giant went down the stairs, at the same time, Goñi came up, brandishing a bowl of something.

After wiping off dragon saliva, Hiccup smiled at the old woman, thanking her for her hospitality. She did not return the look, instead glanced at his helmet.

"I know, I know!" He started. But before he could finish, she had whacked his head with her staff. "Ouch!" Hiccup hissed.

Satisfied, the woman put the bowl down next to him, and then grabbed his chin. She stared deeply into his eyes, going so far as to hold one lid open. Then she pried his mouth open with two fingers, checking something.

"Ahhhh!" He unwillingly said.

She allowed him to close his mouth as she tugged on the hem of his shirt. The wound that had been festering earlier seemed to have calmed down, but it was still infected. Hiccup looked at the wound with a disgusted look on his face.

"Oh, trust me," Astrid's eyebrow twitched. "It was worse."

"You saw it?"

"Yeah, I helped Goñi sew you up."

He gulped. "Thank you."

"Like I wouldn't help." She rolled her eyes.

Whatever substance Goñi had brought in was starting to smell. She applied it to the wound, making it sting, burn, and bubble. Hiccup looked sick.

"It's probably an ointment made vinegar, beeswax, and olive oil. Probably has some cinnamon and comfrey in it, too." Astrid replied, when she saw his face.

"Then why does it smell like rotting maggot juice?"

"That's your flesh, love." She smirked at the mortified look on his face. "I was worried about you, but now, seeing you so animated, I feel much better."

"At least someone does." He gagged as he got another whiff of himself.

GoÃi patched up his now healing wound, stifling the stench a bit. And it was just in time too, because the door to her hut opened and Stoick called up, "GoÃi? Astrid?"

Slightly panicked, Hiccup shoved his helmet on quickly. "How do I look?"

"Like an invalid with a leather sack on his head." She grinned. "Up here, Stoick! He's awake!"

Hiccup whispered back, "No!" But it was too late, as heavy steps came up the stairs.

Like a heavy curtain, an air of unbridled tension fell on the room. It was suffocating and made the three sweat.

An unsettled look was on Stoick's face. "You're up." He acknowledged.

"Ah, yes, not that long ago, actually."

"Feeling okay?"

"It hurts, but I'll get over it." There was a smile in his voice.

"Good, goodâ€| " The chief scratched his head for something to say. Obviously, Hiccup didn't know that he had found out his identity, but he wasn't sure how to tell him. 'Oh, you know, I know you're actually Hiccup, you don't need to wear your helmet anymore?' A bit too casual.

"How are my men?" Wart asked, switching more completely into his chieftain personality.

My men. Stoick had to hide a sharp intake of breath. "Uh, fine, fine, most of them are helping us with the final harvest."

"Oh, that's nice." He amended.

The older chief sighed. "Astrid, could you giveâ€|Wart and I a moment to speak in private?"

She didn't argue, instead, went from the room without a word.

Stoick sat on the floor, cross-legged, being at eye level with his son. "Look, thisâ€| " He stopped, then started again, "The treatyâ€| "

Hiccup defensively raised his hands. "I know you must be concerned, but my men are good, and honest. Yes, they made mistakes in the past, but they all are hoping for a second chance. Savage was just the exception."

"No, I know very well that the Outcasts are all the same, they can't change."

"But they can. You just need to give them a chance! I swear!"

"I'm sorry."

"You can't just cancel the treaty, Stoick! We've made a pact, a deal! We could go to war over this!"

"Do you want that?"

"No, but my men might." He warned.

"That's exactly what I mean."

Wart exasperated, "don't you trust me? We've conducted business these past two weeks, and I never gave you a reason to distrust me, right?"

"No Wart, I trust you very much."

"Then you can trust my people!"

Stoick huffed. "Those aren't your people."

He chuckled darkly, "I know it's ironic, commanding the same people who enslaved me, but I have a responsibility to them."

"You belong here, on Berk." Stoick stated firmly.

"What, just because I seem young?" Hiccup looked away from the man and sighed, "My friend, you gravely misunderstand. Berk is the last place I belong. I am an Outcast."

Stoick released an irritated huff and seized the boy's arm. Hiccup's head swiveled so fast it could have snapped his neck. With a red face, and a hard frown pulling at his skin, the large man boomed, "I am fed up with this charade! Hiccup, you are leaving this behind and coming home, do you understand?!"

The boy was silent as he stared at the chief. Moments passed before he removed his helmet.

Stoick was emotionally compromised as he looked at the face of the boy who had haunted his dreams. He looked so old now. The scars, the bruises, and the blatant earring, an indication of his time spent in the thrall. What he missed out on, what he drove away, it all came back full force, and hit him like a torrential rain storm. His grip went limp as Hiccup retreated a few inches.

"So, you knew?" Hiccup's voice was the same as ever, begging to be heard.

"I had hunches, but I found out for sure last night. I saw you while you were still sleeping." He said contrite. "Why do you always feel the need to hide things from me?"

Hiccup was silent, as he had no answer.

"Did you think I wouldn't let you stay?"

Still, silence. Hiccup pursed his lips.

"Don't tell me you were putting those criminals' well being before

ours. Don't tell me it's because of that stupid treaty!" He gestured outside.

"Are you mad?"

"OF COURSE I'M MAD!" And there was the explosion. "You lied to my face, Hiccup. You've been lying for weeks now. What on earth possessed you to put on this elaborate masquerade?"

Hiccup clenched his fists.

"Astrid said you were scared of me, but you should have known you could have come back! You didn't need to do all of this!" His brows furrowed. "I didn't realize you were so sensitive."

At that, Hiccup had to retort. "Is that really what you're going to say? Put the blame on me again? I felt like absolute garbage when I left. There was no indication that you would care if I was gone! You weren't even inconvenienced, since you gave my position as heir away to Astrid. I was fully and completely ready to die that night I left. But instead, I survived through impossible circumstances, and brought you everything you ever wanted. I brought an heir, I'm getting married, and I brought peace between our greatest enemies, and yet you still think I'm a disappointment! I'm trying to be the son you want, but all I seem to do is anger you!" Tears were spilling down his rosy cheeks. He planted his hands on the floor and transferred his weight, raising himself up.

"Now wait!" Stoick tried to stop him.

"No!" Hiccup balanced on his stable leg and then stood fully, despite the pain. He wanted Stoick to look at him, as he was. Not as the snout-nosed, crying baby that he knew his father saw instead. "I'm not a child anymore." He said, despite the tears still rolling. "Don't patronize me. I am capable of great things, as I have all ready done the impossible." A heavy sob raked through his body. "Why can't you just love me, dad?"

Stoick stared, his anger gone. This behavior was unheard of, especially from his shy son. "I do love you, Hiccup."

"You never said it before. How was I supposed to know?"

"I thought you would just know. Since, you're my son and all."

"I guess I was just distracted by the fact I was such an embarrassment." He looked down and kicked his helmet, feeling totally vulnerable.

"You really feel like that? After all you've been through?"

"Only when I'm around you; do I feel like I always need to prove something." He met his eyes.

Stoick released another sigh, finally calming down, and trying to understand his wayward son. "You know, when you said that you had died I was terrified. I was so sure that my son was just going through a phase, and that he would come back. But then, when you announced that 'Hiccup' wasn't coming home I realized I had lost my only family, and I was the one that drove him away." He stood.

"You weren't the only one. It was mostly Darla's fault actually." Hiccup intervened.

"I understand though, what you said. That part wasn't a true lie. I can see it, and it was the main reason why I wasn't sure if you were back for real. A part of you has died, I'm sure during your journey, you have looked death in the face many times. And each time, you have risen to the occasion. You have changed, Hiccup."

"In more ways than one." He stated, resolutely.

"You have always made me proud, and I have always loved you. I tried to push you to do your best, but I forgot to celebrate the small victories with you." He reached his hand out and placed it on Hiccup's shoulder.

Hiccup turned his back on Stoick, hugging his arms to his chest. "Chief" He began heartlessly. "I have been dealt a blow. I'm afraid that if I just say, 'you're forgiven' everything will just go back to the way it was."

"I thought you would want to go back to that"

"I would want to" no! Go back to having you rule my life with an iron fist, making executive decisions without my consent, and treating me like" Dare he say it, "like your slave?!"

Stoick pursed his lips. "That's what my dad did for me."

"But I'm not you, dad. I can't just do whatever you want. I can't bend over backwards to appease you, I already have tried that, with limited success."

"What do you mean?"

"Like I said way back then, I wanted to prove my worth by something else, and yet, you didn't accept me until I killed a dragon." He wavered for a moment before using the wall for support. "I still had fulfill tradition."

"No, Hiccup." Stoick shook his head heavily. "I was proud of you before all that. You came, even though I told you otherwise. You were ready to take on that monster for the good of the people. That's what made you a hero. I'm sorry I made you feel like you had to prove your worth."

Hiccup sighed.

"But," Interjected the chief, "I am only human, and I make mistakes. You had a long awkward streak in there, and Odin, it was frustrating. I guess I was trying to help you in some convoluted way."

"Well, I didn't appreciate it."

"I know that now."

Hiccup's strength was depleted as he slowly slid to the floor. Stoick reached out and helped him down. "Dad, our relationship, if you

even want to call it that, is very strained."

"I know. And that's my fault. I'm not so good with loving people."

"Mom told me." Hiccup shrugged. "In a dream." He then elaborated after the bewildered look he got. "Dad, you're an amazing chief." He smiled. "But a lousy father."

Stoick laughed heartily. "I think you summed that up nicely!"

Hiccup grew more solemn, "You didn't tell anyone did you? After you found out?"

Stoick shook his head. "Thor almighty I wanted to, but I respected that you wanted to keep it a secret. It's not anyone's business yet."

"You didn't kill Savage, did you?" He asked with wider eyes.

"No, well, let's just not talk about him right now."

A downcast silence fell over them as Hiccup tried to get more comfortable. His wound was throbbing, but he showed no outward indignation.

"It was my fault." Stoick said, looking down at his hands. "You can blame everyone else, Astrid, Darla, the whole village, but fact of the matter remains, if I hadn't arranged a marriage for you, this never would have happened."

"I see your point of view too, dad." Hiccup intervened, not liking the guilty look on his father's face. "You wanted me to get married, and have an heir. If this experience has said anything, it's that I'm reckless and unlucky—and I may not last very long."

Stoick was silent as a grave as his eyebrows furrowed. Then he spoke, gravely. "I just wanted what was best for my people."

"I know, dad."

"I'm so—" A pained look came over the older man as he reached out and grabbed his boy by the shoulders, lifted him off the ground, and looked at him hard in the eyes. "I am—so sorry. I know it will take time to mend those wounds, but I'm willing to do what it takes." At this point, the tiniest of tears were leaking from his eyes. "Could you ever forgive me?"

Hiccup smirked helplessly, "Do I really have a choice?"

A wide, proud smile appeared on Stoick's face as he pulled his son into a gentle hug. His mustache tickled the boy's forehead as the chief kissed him. A large hand cradled Hiccup's head as the boy rested his head on his father's shoulder. It was the first true embrace they had and the teen was elated that they finally reached an understanding.

"I love you, dad."

"I love you too, Hiccup."

"UGH!" Astrid sobbed from the stairs, after stifling all of her 'aw's.

"You can come out now." Said Stoick with a chuckle.

"I'm sorry, it's just so precious. Can I get in on that?"

Hiccup held his arm out with a smile as she ran to him. Stoick enveloped her into the hug, grinning widely.

"You're basically a part of this family, we just need a ceremony to make it official." Then as the realization donned on him, he lifted the two teens in joy. "Marriage! By Odin's beard! You're getting married!" He set them down, "Now, you should know that I actually approve this union now."

Astrid smiled. "I told you, sir, I knew what I was doing."

Stoick chuckled. "I'm sorry I doubted you."

Just then, the steps to the loft creaked and everyone turned to the new presence. Gobber's gaze darted between the three and then landed on Hiccup.

"I knew it!"

15. Intention

A man sits in the darkness. Shadows caress his face like long forgotten friends. In his chest, there is a pain and grief that is slowly turning to rage. A sinister smile played on his lips, baring his jagged and yellow teeth. Savage waits in his cell, knowing that one of his affiliates would be there at any moment.

As if on cue, the guard, Bucket, was knocked unconscious and two men came into the jail.

"Sir, we've brought what you asked for. She was coming out of the chief's house earlier." One of the men, a burly demon named Sven, had Astrid gripped by the arm. A babe clutched desperately to his mother, ugly sobbing coming from it's mouth.

"Perfect." Savage stood and came closer to the bars. "And the others."

"And the others?"

"Those that were not with us have been dealt with. Only the dark skinned giant remains."

"Keep him alive, he'll make a wonderful slave."

"Whatever plan you have won't work, you insane murderer!" Astrid bit back.

"I'll take that as a compliment."

He snapped his fingers. One of the men leered over the blonde and

then mercilessly ripped the child from her, Pippin wailing all the while.

"No! You can't take him! Stop it!" Astrid grabbed the man's arm and twisted, making his joints crack in pain. But, she was subdued as Savage grabbed her hair through the bars and yanked her back to the cell.

"Listen here, you whore. You're going to do exactly as I say or I will slit your throat."

"I would rather die than take orders from you, monster!"

"That can be arranged."

Still, she stood steadfast, not showing any fear as a knife pressed into her throat.

"Hold on, I think I can convince you." He waved the man holding Pippin over. He gripped the babe by the throat as he flailed and cried.

"No! Leave him out of this!" Astrid was instantly vulnerable. "Children should not be involved in this fight."

"You want to keep him safe? Do what I say."

She was silent as her lip quivered. A knife was thrust into her hand.

"Go to him now, seduce him. In the heat of the moment, I want you to slit his throat. Then, cut out his heart and bring it back to me. If you do this, I will spare your precious little baby."

Heartbroken and devastated, she had no words. Finally, in much too small of voice, she said, "I won't do it."

He narrowed his eyes. "Then you are of no use to me."

Before Astrid could even blink, a spear was run through her, killing her instantly.

"Dump her body into the ocean." Savage ordered, setting the babe on the ground.

"What about the child?"

"Hide him. He'll make a nice heir one day. I'll raise him to be vengeful and ruthless, just like me." He glanced down at the bloody body on the ground. "A brutally murdered mother should do the trick."

One of the men scooped up the sobbing child and wrapped it in cloth to silence his cries, he then left to stash Pippin in the ship.

Savage crossed his arms behind his back. "What of the armada?"

"We have a hundred ships, including the Berserks, all coming to Berk from the north."

"Excellent. No one will notice them until it's too late. All is going according to plan."

"What is your first order, my lord?"

The traitor smiled and uttered such heinous words that his minion's ears bleed.

"Deploy the yak."

* * *

><p>April fools!<p>

I'll post the real chapter tomorrow~

dons fire proof jacket

16. Atonement

I'd like to thank everyone who took the April fools joke so well. I neglected to realise that some of you would read it on April 2nd, or didn't celebrate April Fools. I only got 10 'eff yous' out of the 40 something reviews on that chapter. Majority of you guys took it pretty well. I had this chapter already written, but some of you liked aspects of the fake chapter, so I edited it a bit. Don't worry, no one dies. So here, please read this and feel better. (Forget the fake chapter.)

* * *

><p>Smoke rose from the chimney of the house on the hill. That was Astrid's indication that someone was awake. She made the trek up the hill and snuck in through the door.<p>

Her eyes darted around. "Jambo, Mwaba." She smiled when she saw the giant.

"Oh, Jambo, Astreed." He smiled, from his place brewing tea.

"Is Hiccup still sleeping?" Last night, after he had woken up, GoÃ°i told them in her silent ways to get lost, so they brought him back to his home.

Mwaba smirked at her, then shook his head. "He be asleep all mo'ning." Then he pointed over to Toothless who was curled up tightly, his wings wrapped around him.

"He's notâ€|" Astrid giggled and peered over the dragon. The only indication that there was someone else there, was a bit of blanket sticking out from under the beast.

Then, from the bundle, she heard Hiccup's voice. "I am up Astrid, I just can't move."

In protest, Toothless pulled him closer. Astrid heard Hiccup groan. "Bud, injured, careful!" He pushed and prodded, "I have to get up, you oaf!" Finally got his head to pop out, his hair sticking up in

every direction. "Good morning, Milady." He said with a yawn.

"A little overprotective, he is?" She quirked an eyebrow.

"He's scared that someone will come in while I'm sleeping." Some more shuffling and twisting, and Hiccup got an arm out. At the movement, Toothless finally got up and looked at his human. "Well, good morning Mr. Bossy."

In response, Toothless licked him sloppily across the face, and then everywhere else he could, possibly to bathe him.

"UGH! Toothless! Knock it off!"

The dragon, in fact, did not relent until he was satisfied. Unfortunately, it was when Hiccup was thoroughly saturated in dragon spit, and his hair stuck up straight, reminiscent of a deranged pineapple.

Astrid held in what would be uproars laughter, her face bright red. "I'm so glad Stormfly doesn't do that to me."

"Yeah, well—" He stood up, using the annoying beast as support, and attempted to wipe off the persistent slime. "It could be worse. Nightfury saliva has amazing healing properties. I guess he's just trying to help." He ruffled his hair.

"Come and sit down scruffy, you could use some help."

He knew what she meant as he rubbed his chin and felt the thin beard that had gone rampant in his coma. He balanced on his good foot, seeing his prosthetic leaning by the fire. He groaned and hopped on one leg until he could reach it. Astrid watched in amazement as he snatched up the metal contraption and collapsed next to her. He rolled up his pant leg to show his stump. From the prosthetic, he took a white wrap and did up his leg with practiced fingers. Then he stuck on the leg.

The design was much different from his old one, as it resembled a real leg. The foot was carved wood, a block shaped to look like a foot, and fit into a boot. The ankle was made up of gears, allowing for mobility. The calf was made up of strips of iron, forming a cage that ended with the socket. Finally, the socket was covered in leather, which came up above the end of the prosthetic, and tied like a shoe. Once he tied it on, he noticed Astrid was looking at it in morbid curiosity.

"I made a new one. Cool, huh?" He lifted it a bit. "Not knocking on Gobber's work, but since I've had it for so long, I knew what style of leg would work best." He stood and shifted his weight, showing her how the gears responded to the changed of direction. It worked like a real ankle.

She watched amazed, but only a moment before she rolled her eyes and huffed. "Show off."

Regardless, he took a seat by the fire and allowed her to run a comb through his hair, slicking it back.

"I need a shave." He stated, as his eyes closed.

"Why? I like yourâ€¦foliage." She grinned.

"It's itchy when I wear my helmet."

"Another downside to that accursed, dang blasted thing." She mumbled.

"What was that?" He teased.

She just stuck her tongue out at him, but he didn't notice.

"Would yoo like sum tea, Astreed?" Mwaba asked.

"Oh, yes please, that would be lovely." She finished with his hair and went to find the blade and soap she supposed he hid by the wash basin.

There was a knock at the door. Hiccup, too tired and lazy to get his helmet, haphazardly threw a blanket over his face and waved at Mwaba to get the door.

It was only Gobber. "Mornin'! I brought Toothless breakfast, thought it might be a while before you could get it yourself." He said as he came into the house, a basket over his shoulder. At that moment, Gobber was the dragon's favorite human and he flocked to him like a sheep to fresh grass. "Keep your scales on, you overgrown lizard!" He pushed Toothless back by the snout so he could enjoy his food in the corner.

"Tea?" Mwaba invited.

"Sure, I'll take a swig." And the man joined the group by the fire.

By this time, Astrid had found the supplies and began to lather the soap on Hiccup's face. "So, what's the plan for today?" She asked.

"Well, I'm not supposed to do a lot, since I'm still healing. But I suppose I should meet with my men." He glanced at his friend as Astrid carefully swiped the blade over his jaw line. "What did you tell them?"

"I gave dem an update on yoor condit'n. But I haven't spoke ta dem since we brought yoo home."

"Okay, I guess that needs to be done."

There was a distinct whining from the corner and Toothless slunk over to his friend and rested his head on his lap.

"No, Toothless, we can't go riding until nightfall."

He whined louder.

"No, you spoiled reptile!" He chuckled as he scratched his nose.

"Hey, keep still, or I'll cut you!" Astrid scolded.

Gobber spoke up. "Shavin' yer beard aye? I would have thought you'd try 'n' grow it out."

"It itches in my helmet." Hiccup said, barely moving his lips.

"Well, at least you have a beard. I was never able to grow one. A mustache, yes." He grabbed Hiccup's hand and put it on his chin. "See? Soft as a baby's bottom. But come late winter, it feels as dry as a fifty year old yak."

"Y-yeah, I can see thatâ€¦" Hiccup pulled away a bit too urgently, and subtly wiped his hands on his pants.

"Kwikwi," Mwaba spoke from his seat. "Unahitaji kwenda kuonaâ€¦msaliti." _You need to go see...the traitor._

"Yeye ni kutolewa hukumu ya haki, kama sheria Berk inaonyesha." _He is to be given a fair trial as Berk law dictates._

"Ambao watakuwa wenzake?" _Who are to be his peers_?

"Utakuwa biashara wanaume sita ambao ni hapa sasa kwa ajili ya wafanyakazi mpya wakati wewe kwenda nyuma." _You will trade the six men who are here now for a new crew when you go back_. He paused as Astrid shaved his lips, not looking forward to a cut. "Astrid na mtakuwa mashahidi." _You and Astrid are witnesses._

"I heard my name." She suddenly snapped, wielding the blade dangerously in front of him.

"Uhh, yes, well, we weren't talking about you. I mean, we were butâ€¦.hhuuuuggnnnn." He honked nervously.

It caught the girl by surprise as she was suddenly cackling madly. It had been ages since he saw him so nervous. "Okay! Okay!" She reigned over her laughter. "I get it."

"Oh thank Thorâ€¦" He mumbled.

Astrid carried on her duty as she tilted his head farther back to get the underside of his chin.

"You're rather good at this." He commented.

"I have practice, I shave after all."

"What?" He suddenly looked at her wide eyed. Before he registered what was happening, her bare leg was thrust up in front of his face.

"See?" She said innocently.

He gulped. Gobber snickered.

Suddenly, there was a 'rap, tap, tap' at the door and Stoick waltzed it. "Mornin'!" But his initial reaction was cut short as he noticed his son, with half a foam beard, and his bride to be sticking her leg up in the air.

The large man bellowed a loud laugh. "On to shaving rituals already?" He chuckled. "Ah, yes, I remember when I used to shave your mother's legs for her."

Hiccup grimaced. "Um, dad, too much information."

Stoick paid no heed as he replied, "and she would pay me back by shaving my back."

It was Astrid's turn to grimace as her fingers curled into hooks. "That's so nasty!" Then she slugged Hiccup in the arm and replied, "I will not do that for you!"

"You're already shaving my face!"

"That's different!"

Gobber rolled his eyes. "Fighting already. Seems like the honey moon is over."

"Tea, suh?" Mwaba asked.

"Sure, thanks." The chief took the last chair available.

"Did you need something, dad?" The young chief asked, his attention directed away from the irate blonde with a blade on his neck.

"Oh, just coming to check in on ya." He said smoothly. "How's the wound?"

Hiccup knew very well not to show any sign of pain or soreness, so he smiled and said. "I don't even feel it."

Astrid raised a silent, judging eyebrow.

"Good to hear! But you're going to lay low, take it easy."

"Oh, I was planning on it." He shrugged.

Astrid rubbed off the left over foam with a rag. "All finished." She kissed his smoothed cheek.

He responded with a giddy laugh. Glancing back at the other three men, they all held knowing smirks and he cleared his throat. "I need to prepare for the rest of the day." Hiccup stated coolly as he stood. "Feel free to stay if you'd like." He was cordial. The teen snatched some clothes from a rack in the corner and went behind a curtain.

After rinsing out the brush and blade, Astrid joined the men back the fire for tea as well.

"This is nice," Commented Stoick.

"Very nice." Repeated Gobber.

Once again, there was a knock at the door before Mrs. Larson peeked her head in. "Yoo-hoo!"

She called. Then she paused when she saw the three men and Astrid, and no Hiccup.

"Is he not here, dear?" She asked the blonde.

"I'm in the back!" Called Hiccup.

"Come on in, Mrs. Larson. Everybody knows." Astrid offered up her seat.

"Oh thank you dear, but I won't stay long. I only came to drop off the little one."

"Tea?" Mwaba asked.

"Well, I might have a spot."

At that moment, Pippin, who was clinging around her neck, started to squirm. "Da! Da!" He babbled.

"Your daddy will be out in a moment." Mrs. Larson said as she set the babe on the floor.

"Tutu!" Pippin sang as he started crawling towards the sleeping dragon.

"Wait, just a moment," Stoick interjected. "Are you saying you know?"

"Know? Know that Wart is Hiccup? Why, yes, I do!"

"Hiccup! What's the meaning of this!? Did she know before me?!"

"Yes." Answered the boy from the curtain.

"How could you tell her, and not me!?" The chief stood.

Hiccup peaked his head out from behind the curtain, staring the man in the eye, "A father should do everything for his son."

Stoick sat back down heavily. The boy was right, of course. And that's what made it bite so much.

"Ouch." Said Gobber, sipping on his tea.

Pippin was climbing on Toothless, who had been awoken by tugging at his ears and projections. He growled a bit irately, but then when he found it was the babe, he purred.

"Looks like Toothless has taken quite a liking to Peregrin." Gobber grinned.

Mrs. Larson put a hand over her heart. "That's what I feared the most, that dragon being too rough with the child."

"Oh, come now. Do you think that useless reptile would harm a child?" Hiccup stated as he finally came out, dressed fully in his uniform, his helmet under his arm. His prosthetic was completely hidden by his boots and trousers. He stepped into the room, and smiled at his

family. He was tall and proud, and looked like an official in his suit. Clearly, it did something for him, Stoick noticed. Hiccup's face contorted as he questioned, "Why are there so many people in my house?"

"What happened to taking it easy?" His father asked.

"I will, but I need to speak with my men." With that, Toothless brought over his son, still gripping onto his snout. "I see we have a new baby sitter." Hiccup smirked. He tenderly lifted the boy into his arms.

"Dada!" The infant reached out and grabbed his fathers cheeks.

"Are you having fun with Toothless?" He asked with a wide smile as the dragon in mention butted into his legs.

"Tutu! Tutu!" Pippin giddily waved his hands then dropped them back on Hiccup with a painless slap.

"Tutu!" Astrid cried. "That's so precious!"

Hiccup grinned proudly at his son, and then said. "Toothless is a dragon, did you know that?" Then he took a seat on the floor, allowing Pippin to crawl closer to the reptile.

"Tutu." Pippin babbled again. "Dwagon!" He blurted and shoved his hand in Toothless' nostril.

Hiccup smiled hugely and scooped up the boy, as Toothless snorted and shook his head.

"That's right! Dragon! You're so smart!" He kissed the boy's cheek.

Astrid looked onto the scene with tenderness in her eyes. In one instant, this boy who had stolen her heart had the ability to go from a stern chief to a loving father. All in all, he wasn't even seventeen yet, still he showed the maturity of someone twice his age.

And she was going to marry him.

â€œ

A man sits in the darkness. Shadows caress his face like long forgotten friends. In his chest, there is a pain and grief that is slowly turning to rage. A sinister smile played on his lips, baring his jagged and yellow teeth. Savage waits in his cell, knowing that one of his affiliates would be there at any moment.

As if on cue, the guard, Bucket, was knocked unconscious and two men came into the jail.

"Sir, we've brought what you asked for. She was coming out of the chief's house earlier." One of the men, a burly demon named Sven, had Astrid gripped by the arm. A babe clutched desperately to his mother, ugly sobbing coming from it's mouth. Astrid stood fast, not willing to back down to this man. After all, he was behind bars, and this was her turf.

She was just casually leaving Hiccup's home that afternoon, after he had left to go meet with his men. Her plan was to feed Pippin and put him down for a nap, and then to go flying for a little while. She never expected two more traitorous crew men to jump her in broad daylight.

"Perfect." Savage stood and came closer to the bars. "And the others?"

"Still have no idea. Our only threat is the dark skinned giant."

"Keep him alive, he'll make a wonderful slave." He popped his neck. "After we break him all over again."

"Whatever plan you have won't work, you insane murderer!" Astrid bit back.

"I'll take that as a compliment."

He snapped his fingers. One of the men leered over the blonde and then mercilessly ripped the child from her, Pippin wailing all the while.

"No! You can't take him! Stop it!" Astrid grabbed the man's arm and twisted, making his joints crack in pain. But, she was subdued as Savaged grabbed her hair through the bars and yanked her back to the cell.

"Listen here, you whore. You're going to do exactly as I say or I will slit your throat."

"I would rather die then take orders from you, monster!"

"That can be arranged."

Still, she stood steadfast, not showing any fear as a knife pressed into her throat by the other man.

"Hold on, I think I can convince you." The man holding Pippin came closer, and gripped the babe by the throat as he flailed and cried.

"No! Leave him out of this!" Astrid was instantly vulnerable. "Children should not be involved in this fight."

"You want to keep him safe? Do what I say."

She was silent as her lip quivered. A knife was thrust into her hand.

"Go to him now, seduce him. In the heat of the moment, I want you to slit his throat. Then, cut out his heart and bring it back to me. If you do this, I will spare your precious little baby."

Heartbroken and devastated, she had no words. Finally, in much too small of voice, she said, "I won't do it."

He narrowed his eyes. "You will."

The grip on the child grew stronger and Astrid could hear Pippin gasping for breath. "Alright! Fine! I'll do it! Justâ€¦don't hurt him."

"That's a good girl." He let go of her hair. "Now go."

Astrid spared a glance at the child, weighing her options. Attacking now would be no good, he would be hurt. Conflicted and confused, the girl left without a word.

"What are we going to do next?" Asked the soldier, sloppily holding the child.

"We wait for the heart, then, we send for the armada."

â€"

Astrid sat waiting in Hiccup's home for what seemed like hours. She bit her fingernails clean down to the stub in nerves. Then, the door opened and Hiccup came in, oblivious to her presence.

"Dang, stupid, ungrateful, low lives. Can't trust a dog around here." He sighed and took off his helmet and jacket. He then turned and noticed her sitting by the fire. "Astrid! Whoa, didn't see you there!" He laughed feebly. "Not like you to be quiet."

She chuckled in response.

"Waitâ€¦" Her closed off posture, her fake smile, the fact that she didn't punch him for calling her loud. "They got to you, didn't they?"

"What?" She was bewildered.

"So, what? You went to interrogate Savage and got threatened? Because, I should have warned youâ€¦â€¦"

"Whoa, whoa, whoaâ€¦" Now she was sitting up at attention. "You knew about this?"

"Knew that Savage was out to get me the whole time? Knew that mutiny was in our mist? Of course, I'm not stupid. I just didn't tell you about it, because I didn't want to scare you."

"Well, you should have said something! I've been sitting here in quiet agony for the last hour!"

"What happened? Any threats he put on you are no good, he's locked in a cell, and one of the men who's 'helping' him is actually loyal to me."

"He's got Pippin."

Hiccup was silent. His mouth screwed up ever so slightly before he replied, "Well, that changes things."

"He told me to slit your throat and then bring back your heart as proof."

"Ew." The boy scowled. Then he sighed. "Poor Savage, so predictable. There's a way out of this. It's actually simple."

"Really, because I've been thinking about it for the last hour and have gotten nothing."

"You underestimate me, my dear. Here's what we'll doâ€¦"

â€œ"

Night fell, and Astrid made her way down to the jail, a bloody sack in her hand with a once beating organ inside. She snuck inside.

"Here," she threw the sack on the floor of the cell. "It's done. Now give me back my son." Her voice was raw and breaking.

Savage sat against the wall, his face shrouded in shadow. It seemed to Astrid that he kept his right arm behind his back. He snapped his fingers, and Pippin was brought back in, not much worse for wear. She scooped him up in relief.

"I'm afraid I can't let you leave though. A murderer has to be detained though, right?"

Even though the command was implied, Sven didn't move a bit.

"Idiot, grab her!"

Sven looked at his commanding officer and said. "Nope."

At that moment, the doors to the jail swung open in a flurry of smoke. The other soldier, loyal to Savage, was suddenly grabbed up by a pair of black, back breaking arms.

The traitor heard the click of the chief's prosthetic and glanced up a bit. "He lives." He smirked. "Long live the chief."

Hiccup smirked behind his mask and gave Sven a fist-bump. "Thanks for the tip."

"No problem, chief."

Astrid came up to the bars and hissed at her abuser, "I hope you like nuts, because I'm about to kick yours into your throat!"

A heavy hand laid against her shoulder and Stoick pulled her back.

Savage had to admit defeat. It was fun, the little game they had played. "What's in the sack?"

"Pig heart. Surprised you didn't guess that."

"You got lucky. I almost killed you the first time."

"I guess I was foolish for thinking you would stop trying to kill me after the first attempt." He hummed. "But it seems loyalty won in the end."

"Oh please shut up, you and your stupid morals." The man rolled his eyes.

Hiccup adjusted one of his gloves. "Now," said he, his voice echoing in the stony silence. "What are we going to do about you?"

Savage was mute as he stared at the authority figure.

"You have nothing to say for yourself? No defense? I'll take that as a guilty plea."

"Haven't I been punished enough?"

"Really? You've been locked in a cell, what kind of punishment is that?"

"They didn't tell you what they did?" Savage asked, seemingly already knowing the answer.

"I expected that you would simply be confined until a proper trial and sentence could be delivered. As our law dictates."

Savage chuckled darkly. "If only anger worked within the realms of the law. Boy, you are more cared about then you think."

It was then that Hiccup took a keen notice to the man's arm. He, in fact, was not hiding it behind his back, but had it out in plain sight.

His arm was gone.

Hiccup opened his mouth to speak, but the words died.

"At first, that accursed dragon just took off up to the elbow. Then the chief cut away the rest of it."

Hiccup was stunned silent. "You should be thankful." Hiccup's voice was plainly heard, but it was hollow. "I know the devastation that a Night Fury can relinquish," he gazed pointedly down to his left foot. "Be glad that he only took your arm and not your life." The tone in which he spoke, leered on the side of warning, invoking a threat that would be carried out if he tried anything malicious ever again. The soldier was quiet in contemplation, hushed fear churring in his blood.

"So, jealousy was it?" Wart unlocked the cell and went inside, shutting the bars behind him. "You should have become chief."

"I should have!" Affirmed the prisoner. "There's no reason for you to have taken up the title."

"Do you think I was incompetent?"

"Well..." The man shook his head. "Your ideals were not the same as ours."

"'Ours' as in the Outcast tribe, or just you and Alvin?"

Savage was still.

"He was drunk, you know, the night you killed him. He was completely inebriated when he appointed me as heir. You're right, I shouldn't have gotten the title, but I did. And I decided to use it to my benefit. Ask any of the other men, and I'm sure they'd agree with me that the Outcasts are in a better position than they had been."

Savage sat up to look at the boy better. "You fooled everyone."

"I made everyone believe that I could do good. There was no trickery."

"You bastard! Of course you lied! You aren't Wart, you're Hiccup!"

"When I was with the Outcasts, I was never that boy. Don't you understand? Regardless if I wanted to or not, I never acted like myself."

Savage gazed at him quizzically.

"There was never a moment that passed that I did not fear for my life. By putting everyone else's needs and wants before my own, I survived and thrived." He had Astrid unlock the door and left. Savage's accomplice was pushed into the cell as well. Before he closed it, he looked over his shoulder and said. "You should have taken a note from me. I'm not going to be chief of the Outcasts forever. After all, I have an inherited responsibility to the Hooligans. I was planning on having you take over after the treaty was settled and peace was made." He chuckled darkly. "Doesn't look like that'll happen."

Savage met his face with wide eyes. "Really, you were?"

"Yep, too late now though." He closed the door behind him. "You will stay in this cell for the duration of one week. In that time, Mwaba and crew will travel back to the Outcast Atolls. The elders will be gathered, and your trial will commence upon your return."

Mwaba then approached the bars, and Savage soon found he would rather be unable to see the eyes staring at him, than this giant boring holes into his head. "Yoo showed 'im no mercy. Yoo shall receive none ida."

After the message was made clear, Savage felt a sinking in his bones. The stench of death clung to him, and hope all but abandoned him.

"Dear Thor, what have I done?"

Later that evening found Hiccup, Astrid, Stoick and the free Outcasts on the docks. Astrid threateningly spun her axe in one hand, promising to use it if there was any funny business. The Berk men were asked to stay up in the village, for a reason unknown to them. Finally, everything was packed up and ready to go.

"My friends," Wart spoke as he took off his helmet. The Outcasts were familiar with his face, but some of them still did not connect his identity. "I thank you for your patience. It's been a long extra few days, hasn't it? I'm sure you are eager to get home."

Murmurs of 'amen' and 'you have no idea' came from the group before someone spoke out, "what about Savage?"

Wart smiled. "That is what I wanted to talk to you about." He straightened his back and paced back and forth before the group. "Many of you know me as Wart. That is the name I introduced myself as, and the name I have used the last nine months. But as you must know, this was not my birth name. Savage's attack was inflicted because he figured out my identity."

Astrid gripped her axe tighter, pensive in fear.

"I am Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the third, hope and heir to the Hooligan tribe, and son of Stoick the Vast."

Silence.

Absolute, unadulterated silence.

A soldier from the back, one that Hiccup knew as Alderan pushed forward and took heavy steps. The man had a thick black beard that spread like a lion's mane. His cheeks were rosy and his nose budding from his excessive drinking. He stood a head taller than the young chief, and looked him in the eyes.

"Chief," He stated, holding out his hand. Wary, Hiccup gripped it, only to be pulled into a hug that was tight and sure. "We will follow you to the end of our days. Your loyalty to us has dissolved our differences."

"That's just it, Alderan," Hiccup pulled away and grasped his upper arm. "I'm not loyal to the Outcasts, or Berk really, if you think about it. I just did what was best for everyone. War and violence only result in death and despair. And I've had enough of that for one lifetime." He then looked to the rest of the crew. "So then, now that you all know the truth, who shall strike me down?"

Another man spoke up, a crooked smile on his face. "May the man who is perfect be the one to throw the first stone."

Grins broke out on everyone's faces.

"Three cheers for the chief!"

And so, he Hiccup was showered with affectionate punches and butt-slaps to last a life time. Before it was time to set sail, Mwaba once again placed a huge hand on his friend's shoulder. "Yoo stay safe. I mean et des time."

"You know what? I'm not going to make any promises, because I don't even know anymore."

"Well, sum good came out of dis, at least."

"Yeah," he glanced over to his father. "It could have gone better, but at least the air is clear." He huffed.

"Yoo should tell ya friends, if not the village."

"Yeah, yeah, I'll work on it."

Mwaba flicked him in the forehead and boarded the ship. Men bustled about, releasing the sails, and getting oars in place.

"Hey," called Hiccup one last time. All the men were at attention.

"Stay safe. All of you." Then he narrowed his eyes at the giant.
"Especially you, sir."

"I'm not makin' any promises."

17. Preparation

Two twins sat on the back of a Zippleback. The female with her chin in her hand, the male dozing. A few feet below, Fishlegs rested on his beloved Meatlug, as his eyes were trained to the sky. The trio were bored. Bored because another race was pointless, and the winner of the last three was on his tenth victory lap around the island.

"This is such a drag." Moaned Ruffnut.

"No kidding. Astrid's always busy with chief stuff, no one's around to put Snotlout in his place." Added Fishlegs.

Tuffnut woke up with a stretch. "Hel, I'd take Hiccup as company. You know if he wasn't dead and all."

"Yeah, I sure miss him." Said Ruff with a bit of melancholy.

"Although," her brother continued. "It would be really cool if he was like, un-dead. You know? Like, just popped out of the ground, alive again. With maggots in his eyes, and rotting fleshâ€¦yeah, that'd be sweet."

Fishlegs looked at him, mortified. "What world do you live in?"

Ruffnut started a new topic. "Let's go see what's going on in town."

"Yeah, anything is better than sitting around here."

So, the three traveled into the village, dragons following behind dutifully. Astrid was coming towards them, Stormfly on her heels.

"Well, now. I was just coming to find you guys! Up for a race?"

"Too late, I've had just about enough of the Snotlout as I can take. He thinks he's all that and a pile of rocks." Tuffnut rolled his eyes.

"I'd compare him to a pile of rocks." Smirked Ruffnut.

Fishlegs looked relieved to see her. "How's Wart?"

"Oh, he's great! He's doing very good, after he came out of his coma, that is."

"What about Savage?" Asked Ruff, "do we get to see a beheading?"

"It seems like the chief is waiting for the crew to return to give a proper trial."

"That's bizarre!" Said Ruff.

"Yeah, why not just gut him like a fish?"

Astrid frowned. "I totally agree with you guys, but the chief apparently sees something that I do not. So, I can only advise him to do the smart thing. I guess we'll have to see what the other Outcast's think. Besides," She shrugged. "It's not really any of our business."

"It should be," said 'Legs. "He's our friend too."

Suddenly, a shadow descended on the group and Hookfang touched down for a landing.

"Good Afternoon, Astrid, you're looking fabulous this morning."

The blonde in mention quirked an eyebrow and raised her hand to fresh her axe.

He smiled sheepishly. "Just stating the obvious." He popped his neck. "Up for a race? I'm three for three."

"I would, but it seems like the others aren't up to it."

"How about just you and me, on foot?"

"Care to make a wager?"

"If I win, you kiss me, on the lips."

"And if I win?"

"You get to give me a firm, swift kick to the nuts."

"Oh, I'm not giving this chance up." She folded her hands and cracked her knuckles.

"Can I get in on that?" A new voice joined the conversation. Everyone turned to see Wart standing by the dragons.

"Hi!" Wart! You should be resting!"

He chuckled. "It's like my dad always says, 'You can rest when you're dead.' Besides, I'm good for a good foot race."

Astrid rolled her eyes, knowing it was a bad idea.

"Care to get in on our wager?" Snotlout smirked.

"Sure!" Then he thought a moment. "If I win, you will refer to me as

'my lord' from now on."

"Sure, _if _you win, which won't happen." He smirked. "But if _I_ win, you take off the helmet."

Hiccup's eyes widened.

"What, are you scared? You must not think you're going to win then."

"No, I'll bite. If you win, I'll take off my helmet."

Stunned silence came from the twins and Fishlegs.

"Are you sure about this?" Asked Astrid.

"Yes." He stated calmly.

"I just got chills." Whispered Tuffnut. Ruff nodded in agreement.

"First one to the arena wins." Said Fishlegs, drawing the starting line in the dirt.

Hiccup cracked his shoulders and got set at the finish line. He could run. With his fixed prosthetic and stronger build, his speed had increased, while his klutziness decreased.

He was still clumsy while walking though.

The daily demands of slavery worked his leg muscles, and he was certain he had better endurance than any of the others. But speed? He wasn't sure, since he had never tested it. He could run though, he knew that.

"On your mark."

He touched the line.

"Get set..."

He raised his rear, arching his back.

"Go!"

The gears in his foot shrieked as he pushed off. It felt good to run, to stretch, to use energy; especially after he had been bed ridden the last few days. No father breathing down his neck (again), no soldiers dropping over unexpected with questions, and no wedding planning.

This was as free as he could get without being on Toothless's back.

That is, until Snotlout bumped into his side and threw off his balance.

"Oops!" The oaf laughed.

Hiccup rolled out of the fall and recovered his stance quickly,

jumping back into his run.

"So that's how you want to play, huh?"

He put on a burst of speed and caught up behind him. Carefully, he grabbed the boy's vest and pulled it over his head.

Astrid laughed heartily as Snotlout flailed in his bindings.

Hiccup sided up to his bride to be. "So, what do I get from you if I win?"

"I'll let you kiss me."

"Oh, come on, I get to kiss you all the time!"

She laughed, "Okay, fair enough...how about...if you win, on our wedding night, I'll..." What she suggested made his knees weak and his face grow bright red. Unable to properly respond, he nodded fervently and took off in a mad sprint to the finish line.

Snotlout never recovered the space that he lost, and crossed the finish line a few steps after Astrid.

"Okay, I'll admit defeat." He huffed. "Nice race Wart." And he meant it too.

"Ahem."

"Oh. Right." He rolled his eyes. "Nice race, _my lord_."

Astrid snorted, it was too good to be true.

Snotlout snorted indignantly. "I got beat by a girl, and an invalid! Will the humiliation ever stop?"

"Nope," said Wart, with a smile in his voice. "I know I said if you won I'd take off my helmet, but really, I've been trying to come up with the perfect excuse to take it off." With that, he undid the clasps with shaky fingers. He knew they would each react differently, but it was about time they all knew the truth.

Astrid bit her lip, thinking the same things as her other half. The helmet slid off his head and he tucked it under his arm, fixing his hair.

The group was quiet for a long time. Hiccup could see the little gears in their heads trying to process it.

It was Snotlout that groaned and exasperated, "Oh no! He's hot!"

They didn't recognize him! In all of his tall, leather, mysterious glory, they didn't recognize him! Not even Fishlegs!

Astrid burst out in violent laughter. "Just your luck! You may have to be a bit more specific, dear."

He sighed. "Right right, maybe this will shed some light on the situation." With that, he untied the lace on his boot and then kicked

it off, revealing the prosthetic leg.

Fishlegs' brain activated and it was an instant reaction of gasping and flailing. Hiccup rolled his hand in an effort to get the answer out.

Instead, 'Legs just screamed and tackled him, lifting him off the ground. Mid-hug, he cried, "Hiccup! You're alive!"

Awestruck, Snotlout stood with his mouth open, hand out. While he was frozen, Fishlegs put him down and the twins embraced him. Tuffnut with an affectionate punch to the arm, "Good to see you alive!" Ruffnut kissed his cheek in a sisterly way, "We missed you!"

"I've got to say, it's good to be back." He smiled as he hugged Ruff.

Finally, Snotlout came to and the first thing out of his mouth was, "Excuse me!?"

Hiccup looked at him expectantly.

"You're trying to tell me, you've been my stupid, scrawny, weak, _useless_ cousin this whole time?!"

"Didn't see that coming, didja?" Hiccup comically pouted and nodded. "And I kicked your butt, too."

Snotlout opened his mouth to retort, but snapped it shut and caught him in a choke hold instead. "Looks like you aren't so scrawny anymore." He noogied his head.

"Thanks, Cuz." Hiccup said feebly, ducking to fit under his arm.

"Whoa," said Tuffnut, suddenly putting everything together. "So, that's why Astrid agreed to marry him!"

Everyone simultaneously responded with, "Oh, yeah..."

"Wait, when's the wedding?" Asked Ruff.

"Like, a week and a half."

"Nervous?"

"A bit," said Hiccup.

"Not at all," said Astrid.

Suddenly, Snotlout pointed an accusing finger at his cousin. "You better take care of her! You made her cry. So, you better watch your back, cause if I hear anything bad from her about you..." He punched his palm.

Hiccup snuck an arm around his bride and pulled her close, protectively. "I've gone through Helheim for her, you better believe I'm going to care for her."

"I just got chills, again." Whispered Tuff.

Astrid rolled her eyes. "You don't need to worry about me at all, Snotlout." Then she shot out her leg and kicked him between the legs. "Because I beat you."

"TouchÃ©." He squeaked.

â€œ"

The light of the forge. The only light for Hiccup to work by. Despite the dim light, it was hot. With all the windows closed for privacy, the temperature was slowly rising. He had started out in his full leather jacket, then went down to a simple cotton shirt, but now...what the hey, he was alone.

So what was the young man doing in the forge, alone, in the dark? Well, it was also late, the only time he could work in the forge without anyone becoming suspicious.

So he hammered, heated, hammered, cooled, and hammered some more. It had been awhile since he had worked in the forge. His last big project had been his leg, and that had been months ago. He set the project in the fires once again and wiped the persistent perspiration from his brow.

It was then that the door creaked open. "Hiccup?"

It was Astrid. "Well, hello." He tried to say suavely, leaning on the table, but he failed miserably when he discovered that the counter was a bit shorter than he anticipated. He cleared his throat as she giggled. In a more Hiccup-y fashion, he grinned, "Hello, Beautiful."

She shook her head at his antics. "Hello, handsome."

"What are you doing out here?"

"I was about to ask you the same thing." She rose her eyebrow at his project. "It's stifling in here!"

"Yeah, I have to work at night, with the windows closed. You know, don't want people getting suspicious."

She rolled her eyes. "Right. So, what are you doing?"

He held up a glowing longsword, near completion. "It's the ceremonial sword that I'm supposed to throw at the post. You'll be receiving my great grandfather's sword."

"And where are you getting that? Does your dad have it?"

"No, I need to break into his grave and get it."

She huffed. "You don't need to do all that traditional stuff."

"I know I'm not a traditional kind of guy, but this is different. I want to do it right, you know?" He lowered the sword back into the flames, not quite satisfied with the color it was glowing. "Although, I convinced my dad to let us have an untraditional wedding night."

She sputtered. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means we won't have to have an audience."

Ah, the public consummation. Just by him saying that made all the nerves she was feeling for that night disappear. "Well, that's nice." She smiled.

"You never answered my question." He examined the sword, finding it at its highest point of malleability.

Astrid waited to answer him as he hammered the small kinks out. Satisfied, he put the weapon in the cooling bucket and turned to her. The girl pulled at her collar. It was sweltering!

"I was looking for you." She said simply. "I came to say goodnight."

He smiled, touched.

"But" the young woman tilted her head. "Seeing as we're alone and all" She swaggered up to him, with a little swing to her hips. "Maybe we could have a little romantic night by the fire?"

Hiccup had to try to swallow a couple of times before he meekly supplied, "Yeah I mean, we've both been so busy"

Then she touched his arm. Instantly, his heart rate increased. He was used to it, since it happened every time she laid a finger on him. A stupid little grin came over his face as he reached out to cup her face.

Astrid enjoyed seeing Hiccup flounder. It was a calming reminder that no matter how much he changed, the boy she fell in love with was still there. But this was different. Sure, he stuttered, and his face was turning red, but

She was doing the same. His bangs stuck to his forehead, beads of sweat clung to his skin, and his eyes

Curse his eyes! So green, so expressive, so gripping.

She averted her gaze to his nose, then his thin lips, then his stubbly chin. None of this was helping her peace of mind. She was hyperaware of his dirty, ashen hand on her cheek, and the fizzling heat coming from it.

He whispered softly, his breath caressing her cheek. "I love you Astrid." His voice just had a enough huskiness in it to make her knees quake. This would not do. Any moment now, she'd be swooning into his arms, like a frail girl. Someday, she would, she knew, but not before she was married to him.

"I love you too." She smiled, ignoring her inner tirade. She leaned in to capture his lips, and got a whiff of him.

Dash it all! He would pay for this!

She turned her nose up. "Haddock, you stink."

"What?" He asked, bewildered, especially since he was still awaiting her sweet lips.

"You smell like raw fish wrapped up in Gobber's underwear." Which, of course, was a complete and utter lie.

He sniffed himself, but found nothing out of place. "Gee, I'm sorryâ€|"

"Don't apologize, just take a bath you pig."

He frowned. "So no kiss then?"

She exasperated. "Fine!" In one swoop, she hooked her arm around his neck and placed a thorough and fierce kiss that only lasted a few seconds. "There. Better?"

He nodded dumbly.

She allowed herself to giggle and sashayed out of the forge, calling back, "Goodnight, lover boy!"

Hiccup weakly waved with his fingertips before collapsing in a pathetic heap. Sweet Sjöfn, he couldn't wait to marry her!

â€"

Laundry day. At least, for Hiccup it was. When a man only lives around other men that wear the same clothes for weeks, one tends to have a meager wardrobe. More so for the chief, since a) he was smaller than everyone else and b) he grew out of the clothes that he had. Now that he was at home, preparing to get married, he learned he couldn't wear his sweat-stained, body-odor riddled shells. Even his jacket was smelling up to high Valhalla.

Per Astrid's request, Hiccup had taken a nice long bath with soap and spicy herbs to rid himself of the musty-metal smell. He had the tiniest hunch that she really didn't mind it, but only said so to get the upper hand.

So now, he sat in his home, resting as he had promised. The wound looked much better as it had lost its inflamed look. Now, it was just reminiscent of a ripped cloth that had been sewed back togetherâ€|

But, it was flesh, of course.

Anyway, Hiccup reclined on the bench in his home. Adding pictures of Pippin and Toothless to his sketchbook. The babe sat on the floor, playing with the dragon's naked tail.

The front door opened. Casting a glance, Hiccup found it was just Astrid, and grinned at her. "Good morning, milady."

"Good mornâ€"...dear Odin, what are you wearing?"

"A silk robe I got in a trade with the Seres. Like it?" He stood, letting the fabric cover him completely. "It's a little big, but I

figure that I'm still kinda growing, so..."

"It's weird..." She stated, looking at the green fabric. "It looks like...a dress."

He colored. "Untrue! Only distinguished men in the East can wear these." He left out the fact that most women wore them as well. "You have to feel how soft it is!" He waved the knee-length sleeves in emphasis.

She reached out to feel the sleeve, but he pulled her into a warm hug, encircling her in the emerald silk.

Almost immediately, she sunk into his hold, running her hands up and down his back. That hazy feeling crept into mind as she laid her head on his shoulder. "Very soft." She muttered.

He hummed in reply, tightening his grip on her. Unknown to Astrid, it had really been a ploy to hold her in his arms. Hiccup had one too many nightmares about her last night. Ever since the matter with Savage, actually. The man had the nerve to threaten his family, and that scared him. Hiccup knew that he was never really safe, but wanted to do everything to protect Astrid and Pippin. Still, he was a seventeen year old boy, there was only so much he could do.

"Hiccup? You okay?" Astrid asked after he had been silently holding her.

"Yeah." He grinned and leaned, throwing her off balance. He braced himself and cradled her just below him.

Astrid gave him a concerned and questioning look before he planted a wet and sloppy kiss on her forehead. "Oh, my darling..." Another kiss, "My little flower..." Another kiss, "My dearest love..." On and on until she crinkled her nose and pushed away from him, just a bit.

"Hiccup, what are you doing?"

"I'm being romantic!"

"Well, you need to stop, it's freaking me out."

He pouted.

"Let me up," she patted his arm.

He still pouted and shook his head.

"What!" She cried indignantly. But before anything else was said, he crashed his lips against hers, rendering her silent and senseless.

Finally, he pulled away, locking gazes with her cloudy eyes.

"H-how..." She mumbled.

"That," he said pointedly. "Was for lying to me about not liking the way I smell in order to get the upper hand."

She gasped in horror, and then became livid. "You littleâ€!" And then she punched him in the arm. Hard.

"Ow!" He rubbed the sore spot.

"That's for worrying about me and thinking I needed protection."

He smiled softly. "Astrid, you're a better Viking than I ever was. Even now, I want to be more like you. But that doesn't change the fact that I still worry about you. Heck, I worry about my dad." He huffed. "I love you Astrid. I don't know what I would do without you." Then he smirked, "you can't tell me that you don't worry about me, even though I can protect myself now."

"True. True." She shrugged. "But you're still hopeless."

"I suppose I'll just need to keep you around."

She played with the oath band a bit. "If only there was some way to bind us together. OH WAIT." She rolled her eyes.

"You're amazing." He said, nudging her with his nose.

"I know."

At that moment, Pippin began to scream and cry.

"Wuh-oh." Hiccup looked to his son. "Toothlessâ€|" He started in warning.

The black dragon stared back in horror, not having any idea what happened. He licked the little human, but on it wailed.

Astrid pulled out of Hiccup's embrace and picked up the child. She sniffed him, "Well, he doesn't need to be changed."

Hiccup held out his hands and took him, carefully rocking him in his arms in an attempt to calm him. "_Hush little baby don't you cry, or the Berserk's gonna stab you in the eyeâ€|_"

The wailing intensified.

"Give him to me!" Astrid took him back, coddling him.

"Maybe he's hungry." Shrugged the young man.

At that, Toothless tried to make himself helpful and regurgitated half a fish.

"Buddy, that's not going to help." Hiccup smirked and scratched his nose.

"I'll take him home, mom's got some mashed fruit for him."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, you're finally resting. And you've been watching him all morning." She stole a blanket to wrap up the child to take him out in the cold air.

"Astrid?" He asked, pensively.

The tone in his voice made her uneasy as she looked back to him.
"Yeah?"

"Am I a good dad?"

What a question. Annoyed, she marched over and hit him in the shoulder. "Hels yeah! You are the best father ever."

He rubbed his arm, blushing. "It's justâ€¦" He looked to the floor. "The only thing I know about parenting is from my dadâ€¦and he's not reallyâ€¦and then, Pippin isn't even my biological son! What if I don't love himâ€¦"

She hit him again. "Your father did a fine job raising you, but you aren't him. Love practically leaks from your pores. And who cares if Pippin isn't yours? You told me that you wouldn't let him die. You saw that he was defenseless, everyone around you was telling you to let him die, but you didn't. You wouldn't."

He simpered as he looked up at her.

"Just like you wouldn't let a certain dragon die."

At this point, Pippin was no longer shrieking, but making unhappy sobs. Hiccup rubbed his fuzzy head. "It's okay little champ." Then he went to sit back down at the bench. "See you later, Astrid."

She smiled. "See you." As she went to the door, she turned around one last time and pointed at him. "Awesome dad."

â€œ"

With all the wedding preparation, a week passed in a day. It was a gray morning when ships were spotted off the coast. Hiccup slept like a rock in the double bed. His ever faithful dragon took up what ever space on the bed the boy did not occupy. Hiccup slept so soundly, he didn't even hear the front door open and Astrid shout, "Hiccup!"

She stormed up the stairs to see him snuggled cutely into the blankets, his hair slightly ruffled, Toothless pushed up against himâ€¦she almost didn't have the heart to wake him. She did though, with a hand to the chest and frantic shoving.

"Toothlessâ€¦rideâ€¦laterâ€¦sleepâ€¦" He muttered.

"Hey, sleepyhead. Wake up! It's your bride."

"Five more minutes, 'Strid." He rolled over.

She exasperated. "Mwaba and the ships have been spotted coming towards Berk."

"I thought he was supposed to come tomorrowâ€¦are you sure it's the Outcasts?" He spoke with still closed eyes.

"Skulls on the bow. It's the Outcasts."

He grumbled. "It'll take an hour or so for them to get to port." He yawned and buried his face in his pillow.

Rolling her eyes, Astrid lifted the covers and slipped in next to him. Hiccup thought she had agreed with him and decided to spend that hour dozing, but she put her freezing hands on his back.

"Holy mother of Odin that's cold!" He shouted, springing from the bed. "Fine! I'm up!"

Astrid got off the bed and made her way around the room as the boy swung his legs over the edge and wiped his face. Toothless noodled under the blankets and continued to sleep.

"There was about six ships spotted. It seems like more than just a few people wanted to attend our wedding. I suggest you talk to your father about housing for them." She handed him a clean tunic, his jacket, helmet, and boots. "I'll meet you down there." She kissed his cheek and left.

With a heavy sigh, Hiccup pulled on his shirt and prepared for his chieftain duties.

About an hour later, Hiccup, Astrid, and Stoick were down at the docks, ready to greet the ships rolling in. The rest of the village waited up above, astounded by the amount of people arriving.

First person off the ship was a familiar face, looming as huge as ever, and shaking the deck as he moved.

"Mwaba! Glad to see you unharmed!" Hiccup hurried to him and embraced him. "I thought you were were going to bring a few crew members and the elders. Not, what, a quarter of the tribe!" He joked.

Mwaba was much less enthusiastic. "Des es da entire tribe, Kwikwi."

Suddenly, the air felt less of that of a reunion, and more like a funeral. "Did you check your Norse, Mwaba? Is that what you meant to say? This isn't a subject to be practicing your jokes with."

"I em not joking. While we were gone, de Atools were raided by de Berserkers. Des are de survivors."

Hiccup couldn't help but be happy that so many people survived a raid. By the Berserkers, none the less. Still, he wasn't quite sure what to do.

"I said dat weh all go ta Berk. Safe here, dragons ta protect us."

"It was a smart move." Amended Hiccup.

Stoick then intervened, hearing the whole story. He addressed the crowd on the boats. "You are all welcome to stay with us. Our village is small, but we will do our best to attend to you."

"We 'ave many supplies, we will work ta stay." Mwaba then spoke softly. "Mosta des people were slaves. Dey know how ta work ta

live."

Hiccup then spoke to the ships. "My people, my heart is heavy, knowing that I could not be with you during this hard time. We are allies with Berk, and I employ you, we have suffered enough, be on your best behavior."

A child shouted from one of the ships. "Hostile nature is in the past!"

The rest of the tribe responded. "We are a tribe of peace, at last!"

Hiccup looked at Mwaba in surprise. "Did you teach them that?"

"Et was a long trip."

Stoick was already giving orders to the Berkians to help unload supplies and get people settled. Hiccup spoke with a soft voice. "What a disaster."

"Wala kujisikia hatia kuhusu hilo. Ninyi hamkujua wengi wa watu, unaweza kuwa na inayojulikana." _Don't feel guilty about it. You didn't know most of the people, and you couldn't help it. _

"But I have a responsibility to these people. Instead, I was busy with my own selfish needs."

Mwaba looked at him hard and said, "Yoo have provided a home for dem. De alliance wid Berk es de best ting to eva happen ta da Outcasts." He clapped his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Besides, you were given da role when Alvin was drunk, and des people were rotten ta yoo. Yoo owe dem nauting, but yoo still let dem stay."

Hiccup was silent as men, women, and children alike wearily climbed out of the ships and were welcomed to the tribe with hearty handshakes.

"Berk just got a whole lot bigger!" Gobber called among the crowd.

"We feast tonight, in honor of those we have lost!" Stoick announced.

The promise of food and mead was enough to bring the spirits up of all the exhausted travelers.

â€"

That evening, Hiccup and Astrid sat at the head table with Stoick, Gobber, and Mwaba. One of the elders joined as well, as the matter of what happened next came up.

"We have already given a proper funeral for those killed during the battle. A funeral pyre, with what boats we could salvage." The elder said. "We gathered all valuable belongings and headed straight here, with General Mwaba's suggestion."

"Any idea why the Berserker's raided? Last I knew, Dagur and I had a mutual understanding."

"No one knows why that boy does what he does, that's why he's deranged."

"I really hope he doesn't plan on coming here. Berk and Berserk aren't allies anymore."

"Yes, but I think Dagur is afraid of the dragons that protect this land."

"And he should be!" Stoick said with pride.

Hiccup smiled. "Well, at least we have them to protect us. I'm more concerned about what we're going to do for the winter. It's basically here, and we don't have enough food for everyone. Unless, we don't have a wedding feast." He shrugged.

Astrid nodded, "I understand, and it's fine with me."

Stoick had a different opinion, however. "No, there has to be a wedding feast! It's tradition! Besides, I think it will raise spirits if we have something to celebrate."

Mwaba put in his own input. "De main island went untouched. Der might be sum food still der."

"Good thinking, we'll send a search party out after the wedding."

"By the way, chief," added the elder, "I never got to congratulate you on your engagement. I hope you two will be very happy together."

"Thank you, sir." Wart smiled.

It was then that a girl approached the table. She hadn't changed, not one bit, even if she did lookâ€|how would he describe it? Healthier. Her sun bleached hair was long and matted, and her skin was riddled with scars. Her voice was soft.

"Excuse me, chief? My name is Aisling. I was told to come to youâ€|I am looking for a young man named Wartâ€|he knows the whereabouts of my son."

Hiccup was quiet as he studied her. Her temperament was the same, but she looked desperate, as if she didn't know what else to do.

"Come with me." He stood. He leaned towards his bride and whispered, "Please get Pippin and meet me outside."

Astrid, wide-eyed, nodded and stood as well.

Outside, Hiccup unclasped his helmet and looked at the girl. It took less than a few seconds from her to recognize him, and she fell at his feet. "My lord!" She cried, "I am so sorry for how I treated you in the past! I-I-..." She scrambled, looking for an excuse.

"A lot of people treated me badly in the past." He spoke, somber. "Now, as I recall, you did not want your son. You said he was a burden."

"Yes, I did. But didn't you eventually come to understand what I meant? You sent him off, somehow, didn't you?"

"Yes, but not because he was a burden, but for his own safety."

"He didn't make life so much harder?"

"He did. But I knew what I was getting into. Taking care of something defenseless like a baby is not something you can do half heartedly. Half the time I didn't know what I was doing, but I knew I had to keep him alive."

Aisling started to wipe away tears as she talked to him. "I felt that way with my first born, and I tried so hard to keep him alive, but he died. He got sick, and I couldn't help him. I was told that it would happen again. My second born died within a month. I didn't think my heart could take anymore, so when I found out I was pregnant again, I just...stopped feeling."

Hiccup couldn't say he agreed with her, but he could understand. After all, he had sent Pippin off without ever knowing if they would see each other again. He felt the ache of losing a child, and yet, the fact that Pippin was going to a better place quelled the pain.

By this time, Astrid came holding the babe in her arms. Pippin looked around curiously.

The two girls saw each other and had a silent stare down.

The chief sighed. "Where's the father?"

Aisling looked at the ground. "Boarsmouth wanted to protect his home and was a part of the fight. He tripped and was beheaded by Dagur the Deranged."

Astrid grimaced at the gruesome fate.

Hiccup took Aisling's hand. "What is it that you want?" He wanted to know exactly what her intentions were.

"I want my son back." She was firm.

Astrid held the babe closer.

"You're asking a lot, Aisling."

"Please!" She cried again. "I have nothing! Slavery is all I know. The Outcasts raided my home in Kells. My parents were killed and I was taken captive. That child is the only purpose I have!" Her eyes shed pitiful tears. "Please..."

It was a lot to digest. But really, she had just as much of a right to him then anyone else. He swallowed hard and made his decision. Without a word, Hiccup went over to Astrid, his hands reaching. She took a step back.

"You can't be serious."

"Astrid, it's okay."

"No! I won't let her have him! Hiccup!" She gripped Pippin by the back of the head and held him close to her chest. "Don't take him!"

"I know it's hard." He pried Pippin out of her hands. "But we have to do what's right."

He started over to Aisling, Astrid trying in vain to pull him back by his sleeve.

Pippin wrapped his little arms around Hiccup's neck. "Da! Da!"

Hiccup brought him around to look him in the face. "You be good, okay?" Pippin drilled his lips as Hiccup pulled him into a final embrace and kissed his forehead. Then he handed him to the girl. "Take good care of him, okay?"

"I will, I promise."

"And if you or him need anything, you let us know."

"Yes! Oh yes of course! Thank you! Thank you!"

The babe looked to his parents. "Mama? Dada?" Aisling cradled the babe closer to her and started down the hill. "Ma! Da!" He cried back. Then he broke into bawling. His sorrowful howls faded away as the girl disappeared into the village.

Suddenly, two fists were on Hiccup like furious rocks on a prophet. "How could you?!" She screamed. He took each hit in stride. "He was here for me when you weren't! He's your son! You can't just abandon him!"

"Astrid!"

"I raised him! I took care of him! I love him! You can't just!"

Hiccup grabbed her fist and held it against his chest. "Astrid." He stated firmly. "Do you trust me?"

She exasperated. "Of course I trust you!"

"Then, listen to me when I say it'll be okay."

"But!" she choked.

"I know." He pulled her into a hug. "And it hurts."

So she wept against him, in the dark of the night. No one could prepare them for the loss of a child, and at that moment, no one could understand their pain.

18. Desolation

So basically, this was supposed to be the last chapter. But when I

started, my brain was like, "Two more," and I was like, "Okay, fine."
And so then I was writing it, and halfway through, my brain went,
"LOL I mean three."

RRRRRRR

I am finishing up college this month so if I don't upload at my
normal time, please be patient. :/

* * *

><p>Night, when the atmosphere takes up a foreboding disposition. It
was one of those times when darkness fell like black, gelatinous
soup, forbidding you from seeing five feet ahead. But when you've
trained your senses in order to survive, it's almost
comforting.<p>

Hiccup walked Astrid back to his home after they were separated from
Pippin. She was silent, not really having anything else to say to
him, but still berating him in her mind. And he knew it.

The young woman looked exhausted. She didn't even fight him as he
carried her up to bed, took off her shoes and tucked her in. He sat
next to her for a while, running the back of his fingers over her
cheek.

"You look like you have something on your mind." She said
softly.

"I'm...not staying tonight." He stated with no inflection.

"Why? Afraid I'll hurt you?" She mocked.

"Don't let the sun set on your anger." He grinned ever so
slightly.

"I was angry after the sun had set already." She sighed.

"And you have every right to be angry." He nodded.

"Then stay here so I can silently stew while I fall asleep."

He stood instead. "I'm afraid I can't."

She sighed again, her anger slowly dissipating. "Duty calls?"

He walked over to the chest he kept in the corner. Astrid didn't know
all that was in there, and sometimes things were better left unknown.
"Not this time."

This peaked her interest. "Oh?"

"Yeah." He took out black clothes, abandoning his leather attire.
"It's something personal."

She sat up. "You aren't going to steal Pippin back, are you?"

He chuckled. "No, no. This has nothing to do with Peregrin." He
slipped the long sleeved, high collar tunic on and then hooked a
small bag onto his belt loop.

"Then what is it?" By now, Hiccup had completely disabled her frustration and turned it all into curiosity.

Now ready, he walked back to her and pushed her back to lay down. "Sleep tight, Astrid," and he kissed her.

As he pulled away, she gripped the back of his neck to keep him close. "How am I supposed to sleep with this giant hole in my chest?"

He smiled. "That's why you're sleeping here." He pecked her once more then stood up straight. "Mwaba will be downstairs if you need anything. I'll be back in the morning." He didn't give her the chance to respond as he hurried down the stairs and left.

Astrid sat staring at the door for a moment, trying to figure out what he was doing. Then, Astrid came to the miserable conclusion that he had changed and she had only known this new Hiccup for a week or so. There were things that happened that she would never understand.

And that was a burden he would carry alone.

Outside, Hiccup whistled for Toothless. Almost immediately, the dragon was bounding around him like an excited kitten. "Hey bud! Ready for some night flying?!"

In response, Toothless gave him a gratifying lick across the face.

Hiccup grimaced as he felt the saliva dripping off his chin. "I'll take that as a yes." From the bag, he withdrew a face cover that hid his jaw and nose from sight, a headband, and a pair of goggles he had fashioned from bronze, leather, and fitted with thin glass lenses. The lenses had been a trade with rome, as a lens maker had made them to be slightly convex to magnify distance. Of course, he was using it to keep the wind from watering his eyes. He mounted and off they went.

Anybody else would have needed a compass, but the young boy had the direction he needed to go memorized. The winter air nipped at his face, whipping his hair around, and even freezing the tips. Toothless prepared to bank northwest, but his rider kept his tail positioned to go northeast. Curious, the Nightfury looked up to his human, and Hiccup patted his mane. "We're going on a little trip tonight. Are you okay with a long flight?"

Did he really need to ask? He crooned happily and put on a burst of speed. In about an hour or so, the destination came into view.

The Outcast Atolls.

Toothless let out a whine, smelling the smoke still in the air from the three ring-like islands.

"It's okay Bud. There's nothing there." Though he said so, I wasn't sure if it was true or not. Above all else, he had come to this place for closure. To see if the place of his captivity had really been burned and destroyed.

They touched down in the town square, where he was sold. Ash covered the ground like snow but the air was still thick with heat and smoke. All the stalls in the town were empty; of wears and people. Buildings were charred, some barely standing. It was haunting.

Toothless stayed close to Hiccup, wanting above everything to keep him safe. Hiccup briefly glanced around, knowing that anything related to the Thrall had been disposed of since he had become chief. There was not much else to see but bloody marks on walls and the paved plaza. The town was absolutely dead.

The road to Ragnar's house was jolting at best. A little dirt road, riddled with rocks and potholes made the trek unbearable every time he travelled with them. Now, it was run smooth by fleeing foot falls. The houses and meager gardens that lined the road were gone, or reduced to piles of sticks. Hiccup remembered the first time he had gone down this road, the day he was bought to be a slave. It was the same day he met Mwaba. Scratch that, the same day he was impressed by Mwaba. The giant had instantly noticed his lack of limb and placed him on the cart effortlessly. He sat between a box of over-ripened apples and a chicken. Ragnar had taken up the seat on front of the cart as Mwaba lifted the handles.

"Don't eat those apples, boy. They're for the pigs. 'Sides, most of them are rotten and I'd hate to see you get sick before you start work."

The cart moved with a jerk and suddenly they were leaving.

Hiccup started down the familiar road, nothing but blackness awaiting to swallow him whole.

There sat a tree on the side of the road. The untouchable tree as he liked to call it. It always bore fat, juicy honey crisp apples, and for a starving child, it seemed like it was too good to be true. He recalled when he picked one, not realizing that the owner of the tree had been watching.

"Hey!" The old man had screeched.

Immediately, Hiccup bolted down the road as fast as his stump of a leg would allow, but he didn't get very far before the wooden prosthetic popped out of place and he fell face first in the dirt. The old man caught up to him and lifted him from the ground by his arm. Faced with fear, Hiccup only clenched his fist as the man raised his axe.

"The penalty for stealin' is your right hand!" He emphasized with a firm shake.

"No please! I'm sorry! I'm just so hungry! Here! Take it! I didn't even breathe on it!" He held out the fruit, begging with everything in him.

The man took note of his thin frame and missing leg. "Fine." He dropped the boy and swiped the apple back. "But if I catch you so much as looking at my tree, I'll have your other leg cut off!" He hissed. With that, he stormed off.

Now the tree was barren. It's branches were charred, but the trunk went undamaged. Hiccup preened some of the lower branches with a large pocket knife. Maybe it would bare fruit once summer came.

But it was unlikely that anyone would be here to enjoy it.

It was only a few minutes later that they arrived at the old farm house. Well, what was left of it. It was cracked open. Only the wall with the stairs remained, stairs that went no where, as the loft was gone. The wooden floor creaked under his feet as he kicked away some of the rubble. Louder creaking indicated that his faithful companion was not far behind. "This was the house of the woman who tormented me." He told Toothless. "Here, I spent my time, doing everything to make her happy and never succeeding."

The sounds of Ælman's shouting reverberated into his head. "You're so puny, I can't believe you haven't died yet." "Worthless." "Lazy germ." "Useless toothpick." "Spineless urchin." "I'll be better off when you die."

And though, she said awful and hateful things, he was only to reply, "Yes, Missus."

He spotted the sewing kit he had used everyday, protected by a fallen beam. The metal case was melted and bent, but regardless, he pocketed it. He surveyed the room once again, this time with a different eye. It was hard to believe that just a few days ago, people had lived in this home. This was a home—but now, a desolate pile of debris.

The fire pit was still there. A few stones were knocked out of place, but it could hold a fire. It was his duty every morning. He would come in and light the fire. When Pippin was around, he would lay a blanket close by and set the babe on it while he worked. He often caught Ragnar giving him affectionate glances, but Ælman would nudge him out of the way with her foot. One time, she was aggressive and Hiccup had to leap to protect him.

He turned to leave, but stopped in amazement as the mirror that hung next to the door was still there. Foggy and cracked, but still there. He hated the damn thing. Ever since he had entered the thrall, he had avoided his reflection like the plague. Thick vests and long tunics could hide his lanky form, but not so here. Everyday, he would walk passed that looking glass and see himself, and his slow progression towards death. The young man stretched like a tree reaching for the sun, the days work making his arms sinew and sturdy, but what little weight he had had spread all over and he wasn't gaining anymore. Then Pippin came along, and he almost stopped eating all together. That was the most finite image that burned in his head.

A walking skeleton.

The glass suddenly shattered as a rock collided with the surface. He breathed harshly through his teeth before Toothless snorted by his ear.

Hiccup settled a hand on his snout to calm himself down. "Sorry bud—I'm okay. I'm okay—" Though the words came out, the meaning wasn't really there.

There was one last place he needed to go. And it still stood, untouched on the hill. The barn where he had lived. The hike was old and familiar, and yet, saturated with an unknown feeling. The field was still soft from the forgotten harvest, but the once straight mounts were dilapidated and mused. Weapons lay recklessly abandoned, if not by damage, then by death. So much carnage, Hiccup could practically hear the screams of war, the clang of iron and against iron, and blood falling to the ground. Bitter, it was. He made his way slowly up to the hill before tripping on something in the dark. With his eyes adjusting, he came to find an object that was mentally scarring if not the least bit ironic.

A left leg.

Instead of recoiling in disgust and fear, he merely shrugged and spoke to his companion. "At least I'm not the only one." Soberly, he used the head of a discarded axe nearby to dig a trench and buried the body part, in respect, whether it was Outcast or Berserker. Then he continued on.

The rusted hinges on the door howled like a ghost as Hiccup and Toothless entered the building. It hadn't changed in the slightest. Blankets were still strewn around the fire pit, miscellaneous objects laid around, and a few embers were slowly dying from the large fire that was always in place.

Hiccup rounded the corner andâ€”

"MAAHH!" Sheep.

"AHH!" He jumped, not thinking there would be anything living around here. Toothless happily bounded over and nudged the frightened animal. He liked sheep, they were fun. Much too fuzzy to eat, but fun to play with. He especially enjoyed a good round of toss the sheep with Meatlug. Hiccup sighed as he watched them interact.

The barn was the same, so he supposed that he didn't need to climb the loft. Bitter memories awaited. Even thinking about itâ€”|

Pippin's first three months of life. The absolute surprise of the babe being able to recognize him, turning towards his voice, touching his face, and even smiling. That first exhilarating moment when he reached out and grabbed his finger and held onto it. To any other person, it wouldn't mean anything, but to the teen, it meant the world. He had seen that gurgling mass change and grow into a little person, with a spirit, a personality, all before he was even able to speak. All the effort to teach him, to raise him, to keep him aliveâ€”|

Wasted.

"Why did I come here?" He bemoaned.

Da!

Hiccup fell to his knees in wretchedness. He assumed Aisling would give him back. He assumed that she would see how torn up Astrid was, how torn up he was, and be unable to do it. He assumed she would see that Pippin was better off with them.

Well, that's what he got for assuming. And now he was gone.

Water drops were suddenly on the floor, the source being his burning eyes. He stared ahead, looking beyond what was there, and saw the little babe in his mind's eye. This trip had not helped his peace of mind, in fact, it brought back a lot of awful things that he had forgotten about in the rush of his new life.

"Pippin," He whispered. "I'm sorryâ€|I'm so sorryâ€|" He breathed in a long choking breath. "_Daddy's sorry_â€|"

In an attempt to get a hold of his emotions, the teen put his forehead to the ground, lightly tapping the back of his feet on the floor.

"I _am_ pathetic." He wiped his eyes. "And no acting or masks will ever change that."

Toothless heard his berating and sat quietly beside him.

"So this is how I am to be? My life is ruined, laid waste beyond repair? I don't mean to claim that none of it was my faultâ€|but why did it have to end up like this? Why must I have eyes to see the damage that's been dealt? Why must I take one more breath to suffer through these thoughts?"

Toothless laid his head on his rider's lap, and in his own way, comforted the boy, "Silly Hiccup. Can't you see the good that you've been given? You aren't alone, and you don't have to be alone ever again. Some things don't change, others do, but if you dwell on the past, you will miss the present. And that's where you belong."

But, being a dragon, all of this came out as a sympathetic whine.

"If that's to be my fate, then so be it." He sighed, resting a hand on his nose. "Let's get going." He had enough of this dismal place. But still, while he was hereâ€|"Bud, we're going to make one more stop."

A forlorn young woman sat at a table in the great hall. Anyone who looked at her could visibly see devastation rolling off of her in waves, yet only a select few knew why. It would only take a matter of time before it was spread through the village though.

Astrid pushed her oatmeal around with her spoon, her head resting on her hand. It was enough that she got out of bed and came out in public. She just hoped everyone would notice her closed off nature and leave her be.

Almost as soon as she hoped that, did the bench screech and four people sat down.

"Good morning, Astrid. You look as lovely as ever." Snotlout said, obviously oblivious to her woe.

She wanted to threaten him, to glare, to shake a fist, but she was so exhausted, she merely flicked a spoonful of oatmeal at his face. It landed with a splat and Tuffnut chuckled.

"That's a good look for you."

Astrid was only able to quirk up her lips the tiniest of smirks. She hadn't slept all night, her mind far too distracted.

"So, where's Hiccup?" The other twin asked, looking to the blonde.

"Odin knows." Astrid answered, despondent.

"Uh oh, honeymoon's over." Tuff chuckled.

"The wedding hasn't even happened." Laughed Ruffnut.

Oh, she had to go and rub salt in that wound. He went and did all this three days before their wedding.

"Did you guys get in a fight?" Fishlegs asked nervously.

"He promised me that he would treat you well! If he hurt you in any way, I'll cut off his good leg! With my face!" Snotlout pointed to himself emphatically.

"Like your face is going to do any damage." Fishlegs muttered.

"Another wise crack like that, and I'll punch you in the boob."

"I don't have boobs, these are pectorals." He gestured to his chest. WHACK. "Ow, my boobs!"

Astrid rolled her eyes. "You are a boob. And no, we didn't have a fightâ€|per say. Heâ€|Well, he gave up Pippin."

"The baby?" The teens never really got acquainted to the child, and they figured it was because Hiccup was sure they'd be a bad influence on him. And they would, no denying that. "Why? To who?"

"Well, his birth mom was one of the survivors of the Berserker raid. She begged Hiccup for him, and he let her take him. I guessâ€|because she needed a reason to live, and Hiccup knew that better than I did."

"Soâ€|where is he now?"

She shrugged. "He walked me home last night and said he was leaving. He should be back by now, but knowing him, he's just stalling to get some peace and quiet."

Just then, the doors to the great hall banged against the wall as someone kicked them open. The sound was followed by a quick, "Whoops" before a dark skinny figure came in, carrying a crate on one shoulder and a hammer on the other. "I found it!" He shouted, triumphantly. "I FOUND IT!" He swayed in each direction as he came over and dropped his load on the table.

"Uhâ€|Hiccup?" Fishlegs asked. He had to ask, because he weren't exactly sure who this person was. They looked more like a giant insect, what with the face covering, hair wind whipped in every

direction, and the magnified eyes.

Hiccup slid the goggles up onto his headband, but removed nothing else. Then he said, "Where's my dad?"

Astrid opened her mouth to answer before the chief himself came in and spotted them.

"Ah, when I saw Toothless in the square, I figured you had to be back. Where have you been, son?"

"I was out." He said pointedly. "It started as a personal expedition, but then I remembered that Sven had said that Alvin and Savage had a secret meeting place for only the highest of officials on Outcast island, so I went and did some exploring and I found it!" He said triumphantly.

Maybe it was just Astrid, but she could have sworn that Hiccup was trembling. Those myopic goggles did make his eyes huge, and she had definitely seen red around the edges. All in all, he was acting odd.

"Found what?!" Asked Snotlout, a bit impatient.

"I'm 97 percent sure that this is why Dagur attacked the Atolls." With that, he cracked open the crate and showed the contents inside.

"Rocks?" Asked Fishlegs.

Ruffnut huffed. "We've been through this before, Legs, these are dragon eggs."

"Exactly." Confirmed Hiccup.

Astrid pursed her lips. "These don't look like any type we've ever seen. What are they?"

Hiccup planted his hands on the table and met everyone's gazes, making sure they heard what he was saying. He had a crazed look in his eyes and it unnerved them. Then he said, in a frenzied way, "Nightfury eggs."

The group collectively gasped. "How could you tell?"

"Toothless found them. At first I thought they were rocks too, but Toothless took a couple into his mouth and just sat there with them, sadly." He sighed. "Nightfury's have retractable teeth because they carry their babies in their mouths. I figured that out when I came home to Pippin's head sticking out of his gums. That freaked me out a bit." He continued. "Toothless was trying to hatch these eggs, but he figured out what was wrong right away."

"Are they no good?" Asked Astrid sadly.

"Observe." He took an egg out and set it on the ground. Shouldering the hammer, he heaved it and sent it crashing down on the egg. The result was a loud cracking sound. He raised the hammer to show the giant dent in the metal, and the egg embedded in the stone floor. He picked it up and showed that it didn't have a scratch.

"Amazing..." Fishlegs whispered in awe.

"What does it mean?" Stoick finally asked.

It was then that a black dragon slithered into the great hall, something white and fuzzy in his mouth. Toothless scurried over and nudged his rider, trying to give him the sheep.

"No, Toothless, thank you." He scratched his nose. "Put Snowball with the other sheep."

Toothless decided he would do it later, as he dropped the poor animal and watched the goings on.

Hiccup smirked, getting back to business. "Now, it gets really cool." He placed the egg back on the table and took out a nail from his pocket. He placed the tip on the point of the egg and just tapped it ever so slightly with the hammer. The egg split right down the middle in a clean slice. Inside was a black crystal material.

"Petrified." Hiccup explained.

Fishlegs took one of the halves and studied it. Astrid held up the other to the light.

"So...what does_ that_ mean?" Asked Tuffnut.

"It means that all the organic material in these eggs have been replaced with mineral deposits. They are now egg shaped obsidian gems."

"How could these be obsidian? Onyx, I could see, butâ€¦" Fishlegs started.

"I thought so too, at first, but when I broke it open, I found that it fractured evenly, while onyx doesn't. And it's way too dense to be Onyx. My theory is that since Dragon eggs explode when they hatch, that a certain amount of heat is retained within the egg before the dragon is born. The minerals that petrified these eggs, mostly sand and limestone, got in and melted in the heat, creating a lava like glass that cooled, thus forming obsidian."

Astrid and the rest were baffled as Fishlegs nodded, approving. "That makes so much since!"

"Then if they aren't eggs, what are they good for?" Asked Stoick.

"Still very rare and very valuable, but I bet that Dagur would care less about them."

"Then why would he be looking for them?"

"I bet it's because he doesn't know that they're petrified. He wants a Nightfury, specifically my Nightfury. But if he could have a dozen? I guarantee you, he'd do anything."

"Includingâ€¦" Started Astrid.

"Killing his allied chief to help someone commit mutiny." He huffed. "Not to mention he had an armada ready to attack Berk. I guess he got tired of waiting and took matters into his own hands."

"Do you think he'll come?"

Hiccup was silent for a long time. He took one of the halves on the table and spun it so it turn rhythmically on the table. Then he answered, "He knows what we're capable of, but I don't know how far he's willing to go. He's Dagur the Deranged, not Osvald the Agreeable." He shouldered the hammer anyways. "Just be ready for anything. I've got a crowd of people to rally." And with that, he left.

Astrid glanced at her friends. No one else seemed to notice his strange behavior. Could she blame them? They didn't know him like she did.

"I'm going to go check on himâ€¦" She said, standing up.

The teens paid no attention as they were enraptured by the eggs.

Stoick sided up to her. "So, you noticed it, too?"

"I don't know what it is. And it doesn't really matter, it's just the slightest change in behavior."

"I don't think it's anything to worry about." He shrugged. "Probably just exhaustion. Planning a wedding is hard work."

"Not to mention all the other stuff he has to deal with. And now with the Outcast tribe here, I'm afraid he's going to snap."

Stoick chortled. "Oh, he snapped a long time ago, when he befriended that dragon."

"That's not what I meant." She sighed. "I'm afraid we'll get a repeat of his farewell speech."

"Oh."

"What's he doing now?"

"Well, I told him last night that we didn't have enough housing for everyone, so we'd need to come up with a permanent solution before winter comes. I suppose he's getting everyone together to talk about it."

"But he just got back."

"I saw Mwaba telling people to meet in the square."

"Oh great." Astrid rolled her eyes. Never a dull moment.

"It gets easier lass."

"What?" She glanced at him.

"Chiefing. The more he does, the easier it will be for him. It'll be

stressful for a while, but after he gets the hang of it, he'll be fine."

"I just hope he can _survive_ it."

"Ah, he'll be fine, we'll be there to help him."

She grinned and opened the door.

Immediately, her smile fell as the crowd was bickering and shouting. She saw her betrothed trying to fight for attention in the middle of the group. He was losing badly, as well as being shoved around.

"Kwikwi!" Mwaba suddenly called. The giant pushed through the crowd and handed the helmet to the young chief, then lifted him to stand on the well.

"He's going to fall in, just watch." Astrid shook her head.

"Hello! Excuse me!" His voice called over the people.

"What's wrong with him?" Stoick pondered. "He's never had trouble getting attention before."

Astrid laughed.

"Okay, after his return." He elaborated.

Astrid helped him. Two fingers in her mouth and she whistled. "HEY, SHUT UP!" She screamed.

The bickering calmed down and people turned to look at her.

"Go get em, babe!" She shouted, encouragingly.

He cleared his throat. "Thank you, Astrid."

Suddenly, the crowd went silent, not knowing that their chief had been _right there_. Whoops.

"Right, okay." He clapped his hands, rubbing his palms together. "Umâ€|"

Astrid smacked her head. He had just gone back to square one of his self-esteem development.

He cleared his throat again. "As we found last night, we don't have enough housing from everyone. Especially with winter coming. The great hall will suffice for the time being, but the sooner we can get building, the better for everyone. There are many Berkians that have trained dragons for hauling and loading." He put his hands behind his back, starting to make a recovery from his false start. "And they are going to work with us to build our goal of ten large houses, able to house six people each. Come summer, we can build more to accommodate you that are currently sharing homes with others." He fumbled for a second, his prosthetic slipping, but he kept his balance.

Praise Thor.

He steadied his footing once again, and then continued. "Those who can work will help with the houses, those who can't will take over the jobs that Berk men would be doing for the winter season. Make sense?"

Nodding and murmuring came from the crowd.

"Good. One last thing." He cleared his throat once again and licked his lips. "It's going to be too difficult to keep two tribes in the same village, so, my fellow people, the Outcast tribe is officially dissolved. If you have any matters that need moderating, you can come to me or chief Stoick. Welcome to the Hooligan tribe."

Outrage. Disent. Violence. That was the response he got from that announcement. Hiccup drew up tense as the people shouted at him.

"This is unjust!"

"You can't just decide this!"

"Did you consider how we would feel about this?!"

"Did he clear this with you?" Astrid asked Stoick.

"No, but it makes sense. I think it's a good idea." The man shrugged.

But the once-named Outcasts begged to differ. Hiccup tried in vain to get them to calm down, but vikings would be vikings and humility was too bitter of a pill to swallow.

He wasn't sure how he heard it, but far to his right, a woman spoke to someone next to her. In a smug, and somewhat resentful voice, she said, "Look who's giving the orders now."

Everything until then had been building up to this moment. His violent anger once again reared it's ugly head as he swiveled around to find the person talking ill.

It was that ungrateful hag. She had survived. And just seeing her face added a whole new dimension to the ghosts of the past that had been constantly grating on his mind. He rolled his shoulders back and clenched his fists.

"Uh oh." Astrid stated, suddenly seeing his posture.

"What?" Asked Stoick. She didn't need to respond.

"YOU!" Hiccup shouted over everyone. "Say that to my face!"

The bickering started to fade as people noticed that someone had picked a fight with the chief.

Å...lman was silent as he stared at her. She didn't intend for him to hear her.

"You have a problem with me? Go ahead and say it out loud. I'm sure everyone would like to hear what you have to say."

She shook her head, not willing to tell anyone that she used to _torture_ the chief.

He hopped off the well and went to stand in front of her. "Get this right, you wench. I'm giving orders because I _have_ to, not just because I can. I'm trying to do what's best for everyone. I'm trying to save your sorry ass! I don't get any pleasure out of this. And if you have a problem with how I do things, Odin knows I don't want _you_ here!"

The indication was clear, and by those words, everybody understood the relationship between these two people. Ålman, the farmer's widow and Wart the _Enslaved_.

The surprise and irony of the situation set off a whole new round of whispering.

A boulder sized weight of doubt fell upon Hiccup. He instantly regretted what he had said and wished he could take it all back. "I-Iâ€¦" He stuttered. "No, I didn't meanâ€¦" He turned around and everyone was looking at him, staring through him, judging him. "Stopâ€¦You don't understandâ€¦" He muttered. Still he glanced around, but he was trapped in a sea of hateful faces.

Even if they were only hateful in his mind.

Astrid couldn't stand it anymore. "Mwaba! Get him out of there!" She called.

The giant parted the crowd like Moses, grabbed Hiccup by the rib cage, and carried him out. Stoick was in his wake, ready to clear the situation. She heard the older man say, "Oh, he's still a young chief, you can't blame him for getting overwhelmed by everything that happenedâ€¦" and he continued to talk about the new set up. Thankfully, Stoick had a way with words as a chief and the Outcasts were much more pleasant as he spoke.

Mwaba set Hiccup down by Astrid, up by the great hall doors.

She knelt by him, taking off his helmet. His face covering was still on, but she could see clear panic in his eyes. What exactly he was panicking about, she wasn't so sure.

She cupped his face. "Hey, _Sweetheart_, look at me."

Her soft and tender voice pulled him out of his despair, if only for a moment.

"Heyâ€¦" She smiled at him, in a comforting way. "What's wrong? What happened?"

His eyes darted away from her, in shame. He took a handkerchief from his back pocket and covered his eyes, put his face in his hands, and rested his forehead on his knees.

"Can you get him some water?" She asked the giant.

He nodded silently and headed down the steps.

She waited patiently for anything from him. He was quiet except for

an occasional sob and heave of the shoulders. The teens that were in the hall came out and stopped when they saw him. With a glare and a point, Astrid sent them on their way.

Stoick came up not long after, sending the men and women to work. His concern for his son showed, but his subtlety was absent. "Are you crying?" He asked, squatting.

Hiccup's response came out as a bark, with a broken voice. "Only a little bit!"

"Maybe you shouldâ€"â€" Astrid raised.

"Yeah." Stoick nodded and quickly left, trusting Astrid to take care of him.

"Astridâ€"â€" Hiccup started.

"I'm here." She played with his hair.

"I'm sorry."

"No, it's okay. You don't have to apologize. You had a panic attack Hiccup, you can't just _stop_ it. No one can."

"Thank you for understanding." He spoke without lifting his head.

Astrid smoothed his hair down, only for it to pop right back up again. Then she asked, tentatively, "That was her, wasn't it? Sheâ€"owned you?" She hesitated with the word.

"Yes." He sighed.

"Well, I think you had every right to be angry with her. She treated you like dirt, and now you have the ability to put her in her place."

"You don't think I went too far?"

"Absolutely not! You should have banned her!" Then she shrugged. "But if you banned everyone that ever hurt you, this island would be very empty."

"And lonely." He looked up at her, his eyes red and puffy.

"Yeah." She played with his hair again. "And that's why I'm not chief. I make brash decisions. I think with my heart, and just do what seems best at the time. You're level headed, and think things through. You areâ€"amazing." She simpered. "And don't let ghosts of the past tell you otherwise."

"But I'm not, Astrid." He sat up a bit more, and pulled down his face cover. "Last night, I went back to the Atolls. I needed to see for myself that everything was goneâ€"and yet, I came to realize that I've been making very bad decisions the whole time. If I had just stayed that night, if I had told you that I loved you sooner, if I hadâ€"â€" "

She placed two fingers over his mouth. "Keep thinking in 'what if's,

and you'll be stuck like this forever."

Hiccup sighed and rested his chin on his knees.

"What if we think about this alternatively? What if you didn't save Pippin?"

"I wouldn't have fallen in love with him, and then I wouldn't have him ripped away from me."

"No, Hiccup. He would have died, and no one would have gotten to love him."

He watched her, digesting what she was saying.

"What if you hadn't come back to Berk? You would have been on the island when Dagur attacked."

That would have been bad.

"And Hiccup, if you hadn't given Pippin upâ€¦I fear that Aisling would have killed herself." She touched both of his arms, pulling in closer to rest her head on his. "You saw that, even when I didn't. I was angry, but I was selfish. Hiccup, you are amazing." She reiterated.

He tittered. "Do you know how much I'm worth? Three chickens."

"What?" She was outraged. "Oh come on! You're worth at least twelve!"

He rolled his eyes.

She pulled him into a hug, cradling his head to her shoulder. "There aren't enough chickens in the world to count your worth." She said seriously.

"That was cheesy."

"Work with me, comforting is not my thing."

"Well, it worked. I guess." Finally, he was coming around. "Thank you, Astrid." And he kissed her.

"Anytime." She smirked.

He sighed unconsciously, but stood, putting his helmet back on.

"It still hurts, doesn't it?" She asked.

"I can swear up and down the wall that it was the right thing to do, but I will always regret giving up my son."

Astrid linked their arms together. "I'll help ease the ache. I won't ever leave you." She stated proudly.

"I don't think you realize how relieving it is to hear that."

"Let's get you home, babe. You must be exhausted."

He feebly laughed. "Yeah, a bit."

As they went down the stairs, Astrid's brows furrowed slightly as she wondered, "Where did Mwaba go?"

"I thought the water thing was just to get me alone."

"Well, I thought you would actually want a drink, crying so much and all."

"You don't think of me weaker for that, do you?"

She punched him. "That's for assuming I would."

He rubbed his arm.

"Everyone is subject to their own weaknesses. Tears are a sign of heart, fear is a sign of weakness."

"When did you suddenly get so wise?"

"I'm marrying the chief, I have to give helpful advice!"

He chuckled and hugged her.

By this time, they had reached their house. Hiccup opened the door, and froze.

Aisling was sitting in his house, trying to look small. Mwaba leaned against the wall with his arms crossed.

Pippin was no where in sight.

"What happened?" Was his automatic response.

Aisling stood, miserable. "Chief, I'm so sorryâ€¦"

Absolute terror ran through him as he assumed the worst, but then she finished.

"All night, he was crying for you and his 'ma'." Her face looked puzzled for just a moment before she added, "And Tutu."

Hiccup urged her to go on.

"I couldn't stand it. Who was I to take a child away from those who raised him? I may have given birth to him, but I'm not his mother." She said sadly. "I'm so sorry I caused you all this grief."

Hiccup knew she was referring to what had just transpired an hour ago in the square.

"Where is heâ€¦" He started, but was cut off by a huffing sound. He peered around the table in the back of the room to see a long black tail sticking out. With a smile, he waltzed over. Toothless had reunited with Pippin, who was pulling at his ear flaps.

"There you are!" He sang, relieved beyond all earth.

"Da!" Pippin chirped.

He swooped in and scooped up his son.

"Pippin!" Astrid joined as she hurried over and kissed him. Hiccup passed the boy off and then addressed Aisling. "Thank you for bringing him back." _ It took you long enough._

"Please, I just ask that you let me be a part of his life. If you ever need someone to watch him, orâ€¦"

"Aisling. You can come and see him anytime you want."

"Thank you." All the years of impurity seemed to melt away in that moment, as the young Irish girl finally felt redeemed.

â€œ"

Stoick entered the great hall after hearing a strange sound. His eyebrow twitched as he spotted the source of the noise.

"What on earth is a sheep doing in here?"

19. Interruptions

So, turns out there's three chapters after this on. Maybe. Hopefully. I really hope so.

Just in case you didn't catch it, I changed my Pen name from KHchick101 to P-Artsypants. I came up with the first one in 2006, basing it off my favorite videogame, Kingdom Hearts. But, well, I never wrote a fanfic for that category, so I decided it needed to be changed.

Enjoy!

* * *

><p>Sunrise. A peaceful time of morning, when most villagers were just waking up. Astrid, in fact, was just about to head over to the beloved's home. Mwaba was brewing tea in the older Haddock residence. It was determined that Mwaba would live with Stoick from there on out, since the newly weds would need a home and all. Hiccup suggested it, hoping the quiet giant would be welcomed company for his father, easing the ache of an empty nest.<p>

At this serene moment, Hiccup was on the beach shore with his companion, doing anything but being serene.

"All right, foul beast, come at me again! This time, like you're trying to kill me!"

Toothless narrowed his eyes and growled, then he leapt at the boy, who ducked and rolled away. He gripped his sword and swung at the reptile, but Toothless recoiled and shot a plasma blast at his head.

Hiccup crouched behind his steel-plated shield, and crept closer. He didn't see his opponent's tail moving though.

Toothless whipped his tail around much too quick for Hiccup to notice and tripped him. In apology, he caught him before he hit the ground.

"Thanks bud," he grinned, scratching his nose. "It's the stupid mask, it blocks my vision a bit." As he said this, he jabbed his blade into the sand and then took off his helmet and rested it on it.

"I need a break." He sighed.

Toothless took this as sparring practice was over, and he curled up on the sand.

Hiccup, feeling that he was a safe enough distance from the village, stripped himself, pulled off his prosthetic, and jumped into the ocean...as best as a one legged boy could do.

The water was positively frigid. It was close to winter and still too early morning for the sun to have warmed it up. He shivered as the ice bit through his skin and scratched at his bones. Still, he was heated from his sparring and needed the refreshing bath, if only for a few seconds.

He dove under water and popped back up. Sputtering and rubbing the salty drops from his face.

"There you are!" A warm voice shouted from the shore. His favorite blonde stood there, with one hand on her hips. "An early morning swim, eh?"

"Come on in, the water's great!"

She felt cold just looking at him. "No thanks! I didn't know you took up polar bearing!"

"It's refreshing!"

"Refreshing my butt, get out of there before you get hypothermia."

"I can't." He stated with a shrug.

"And why not?" She crossed her arms.

"I'm naked."

"So?"

He blushed. "You're standing right there!"

"Hiccup Horrendous Haddock, we're getting married in a few hours and you're afraid of me seeing you naked?!"

"Yeah, I know, but we're not married yet!" He argued.

"Okay! Okay! Have it your way. I'll turn around. Is that good enough for you?"

"Yes, thank you." She heard splashing as he struggled to get out of

the water. She figured it would be difficult to get out, since his leg was on shore and all. "Do you need help?"

"I can get along just fine without that hunk of metal, thank you very much!" And then there was a loud, 'Whoop!' Followed by an even louder splash.

Astrid swiveled around to see a knee and two arms sticking out of the water. "Hold on!" She kicked off her boots and waded knee deep over to him. Grabbing his hands, she pulled him up.

He coughed and gasped when he surfaced. "Thanks."

"No problem." She assured, looking heavenward. "Still not looking." She confirmed.

He nodded and allowed her to lead him back to shore, and she may or may not have snuck a few peeks.

She allowed him privacy as he dressed, as she sat behind Toothless who acted like a changing screen.

"You don't have to be embarrassed, you know." She stated.

"Astrid, you may almost be my wife, but I am very self conscious about my body. I don't care how many times you see me, but I will always be nervous." He admitted.

She laughed. "I wasn't taking about that!"

"Oh...?" He asked sheepishly.

"I meant your leg. I used to help you all the time when you were getting used to it. It'll never be perfect, and I don't mind helping you when you need it."

"Oh, no, yeah, I'm fine with my leg. The whole world could know I lost a leg. It's a badge of pride! I only hid it so that people wouldn't recognize me."

"Is that the whole truth?" She asked, voice low.

"It bothers me sometimes." He admitted. "But I'm not the only one that has to suffer. Besides, I get to join the celebration of Stump Day! Which I missed this year." She could hear the pout in his voice.

"I definitely didn't. A group of rowdy, drunken amputees traipsing through the village? No thank you."

"Aww, I missed the parade?" He chuckled. Toothless' wing collapsed and Hiccup walked over to her, his hair still damp. He sat against his dragon's side, facing the sunrise.

Astrid moved closer, and finally noticed the sword and shield off to the side. "Were you sparring?"

"A bit."

"And you didn't tell me?" She joked.

"Eh, just keeping up with my training."

Her eyebrows narrowed. "It doesn't really seem like you." She suddenly became somber. "Are you afraid?"

"Of Dagur? Well, yeah. The kid is a psychopath, and he's relentless. If he was after those dragon eggs, then he would make his way here at some point." He stretched out his leg. "If anything, we're next. He already raided the main island."

"What? How did you know?" She drew up her legs in concern and interest.

"Last night, Pippin woke me up, needing a change. I wasn't about to go to sleep after that, so Toothless and I took a flight. The island was picked clean, except for some hidden caverns, where my sword and shield were hidden." He gestured to the weapons in the sand. "I'm glad I took the rest of my personal items with me earlier."

Astrid sighed, feeling the dread he felt. "Waitâ€|" She stopped. "You left Pippin here alone?!"

"Of course not!" He argued back, and then looked pointedly away. "I took him with me."

She opened her mouth to rebuke him, but then snapped it shut, but not without a firm punch to the arm. "You know what I said about being an awesome dad? I take it back."

"Yeah, I know." He shrugged. "But he was fine, there was no one there and he slept the whole time."

She rolled her eyes.

"You can't shelter him forever."

"He's just a baby!"

"So? My first viking battle was when I was two."

She gave him a pointed look.

"So I hid under a table with my mother's axe. My dad still wanted me to be a part of it!"

"Hiccup, you're too much."

"Whatever you say, milady." He smirked.

She breathed a sigh and leaned against his arm.

"Hiccup?"

"Hmm?"

"Are you going to be okay?"

"You're vagueness behooves me."

"Are you going to be okay? You know what I'm talking about."

He said nothing, but wrapped an arm around her waist.

"I will never know what you went through. I will never feel your pain or have your nightmares. But I wish I could have been there with you."

Gently, he took her hand and intertwined their fingers and then softly declared, "You were."

She shook her head. She was not going to get emotional over two simple words. Her lip curled and she clasped his hand tighter.

"Will you marry me?" He asked, out of the blue.

"_What?_" She raised an eyebrow at him. "I thought that I already was. Isn't that what we're doing today?"

He chuckled. "Yeah. I was thinking in an alternate universe, where my dad was going to let me marry on my own time, and we were still good friends. I think it would be a time like this when I would confess my undying love to you and ask you to marry me."

Now came the blubbering. What she had fought so hard to avoid just started to leak out.

"Is that a no?" He asked in horror.

She punched him hard in the chest.

"Ow!"

"If we're talking in terms of this imaginary world of yours, my answer would be, 'What in Odin's name took you so long?!'"

He smiled widely. "Then I would say something stupid like, 'I didn't know how you felt about me, I was scared,' and a bunch of other lame excuses."

"And then I'd tackle you."

"You're not going to do that anyway?"

He spoke too soon.

Technically speaking, Astrid and Hiccup weren't supposed to see each other the day of their wedding. But she needed to drop off some of her belongs that she couldn't have just left there earlier, and she supposed she would give him a 'see you on the altar' kiss as well, but when she arrived and he wasn't there, the hunt began.

They day began normal enough for Hiccup as he was caught of in a slew of married men giving him advice, including his father. But instead of the normal advice on ruling and leading and whatnot, this was advice on pleasing a woman, something he had no clue on, and was the last thing he wanted to hear from his father. He was accompanied by the chief, Gobber, and Snotlout for a male family bonding, A.K.A breaking into grandpa's grave to steal his sword. It took about an hour, Hiccup diligently cracking away at the stone cover with a pick axe while the other three men chatted idly. Hiccup was quickly fed up

with Snotlout, even if his _dear_ cousin carried the axe for him.

"I'm glad I don't have to do this, taking a sword from a smelly dead guy. Our ancestral sword is hanging in our house, because my mom's dad was buried on a funeral pyre."

Finally, the stone cracked open and instantly Hiccup was overwhelmed by stench. He gagged a few times.

"Viking's don't puke, son!" Stoick said.

Too late. Hiccup lost his lunch next to the mound. In fact, he vomited three times. The second was when he saw the corpse, and the third when he pulled the weapon from his descents hands and a finger snapped off.

Stupid Viking traditions.

Astrid was equally lamenting the ways of her people, as Mrs. Hofferson, Mrs. Jorgenson, and Mrs. Thorenson all fretted and squealed over the bride to be. Of course, no one knew the true identity of the groom, but it didn't matter, someone was getting married!

The bathing ritual had gone smoothly enough. A trip to the hot springs was always welcomed, even with the scuttle-butting company. Astrid was able to drown out most of the conversation.

After, she had her hair braided loosely, her fillet discarded. Her mother was fast at work weaving the bridal crown together as Mrs. Thorenson painted her face and Mrs. Jorgenson put the final touches on her gown.

"Ready dear?"

The bride gave a haughty laugh. "Of course. I've been ready since the day I met him." Not true, but it made for a romantic plight to her mysterious husband.

Mrs. Hofferson sighed. "If you are so sure, then so be it."

"He loves me, mom. He really does. And I love him." She grasped her mother's arms. "Please be happy for me."

"I amâ€¦I justâ€¦"

"Wish it was Hiccup?" Astrid finished slyly.

Her mother only sighed in response. "But we can't change the past."

Hiccup was the first one to the ceremony, a sword on one shoulder, hammer on the other. He placed the hammer at the head table where he would use it later, and then rested the sword on the ceremonial furs at the front of the hall, or the altar. The great hall was decorated for the celebration of the year, maybe of the decade. Flowers were tucked into every nook and cranny as the rafters over head were lit with dozens of tiny lanterns. Everything looked neat and clean for once.

Stoick came in not that long afterwards. One look at his son, and he frowned.

"What?" The teen asked, knowing _that_ face.

"You're wearing that blasted thing?" The chief was patient, but not nearly patient enough.

"Yes." Said Hiccup firmly securing his helmet. "I am."

"You're going to take it off to kiss her, though, right?"

"The mouth piece comes off."

"_Hiccup!_"

"I know! Justâ€¦bare with me, dad."

The great man rolled his eyes and started away. Hiccup continued his marveling at the decorating before something in the back of the room caught his eye. A niche had been carved into the wall back by the royal family's shields. Specifically, the shield that bore his and Stoick's likeness. Upon closer examination, the niche displayed a prosthetic leg illuminated by candles.

His leg.

"Oh wow..." He murmured, coming closer.

"We made that after you left." Stoick suddenly said coming up behind his son.

Hiccup didn't flinch though, he was much to moved at the gesture. "You made this for me?"

"Back when we didn't know if you were coming home or not. It was a shrine, so that we could pray for your safe return." He sighed. "We really can take it down now."

Hiccup nodded as the large man blew out the candles.

"The ceremony should be starting any moment now. People are starting to sit down."

"'Kay." The boy responded. His gaze was still on the smoking candles. To everyone else, it would look like Stoick just gave up hope of his son ever coming home. It was chilling, even though everything was fine.

Shaking himself out of his trance, Hiccup returned to his place at the altar.

People filed in, filling benches and tables. Gobber had a handkerchief on his hook, knowing that he would cry. The Hoffersons sat front and center, prepared to glare Hiccup down the entire ceremony. Aisling carried in Pippin and threw the young man a charming smile. Snotlout, Fishlegs, and the twins sat together at a table, no doubt making lewd and sexual comments. And then, Mwaba came in, followed by Toothless, and took a seat to the far left, so that

Hiccup could look at them for reassurance.

"Any minute now!"

There.

A petite figure silhouetted against the mid-afternoon sky, waiting at the entrance of the great hall. Conversation died down and everyone rose as the bride entered the hall.

Astrid was not a girly girl in any sense, but she tolerated the frills and flowers for the sake of tradition. It would be worth it, she supposed, to see the awestruck look on his face.

To her utter disappointment, his expression was blocked to her, by his stupid helmet. She hoped and prayed that he would not wear it, but it seemed that his cowardice stood strong. _Oh well_, she sighed. Nothing to do about it.

She reached him and held out her hand, the other firmly clasping a bouquet of reinroses.

Astrid could see his eyes, as they were wide and practically bugging from the sockets of the mask. Then a smile crinkled his lids.

"You look amazing." He whispered.

"I would say the same, but I can't see you properly." She rose an eyebrow.

He simply laughed.

"Friends! Family! Brothers and sisters," Stoick started, presiding over the ceremony. "It is with great gladness that we gather here to unite these two young warriors in matrimony!"

But that's as far as he got. At that moment, the horns outside began to sound. Whispers went up the crowd, before Hiccup's eyes widened and he broke out of Astrid's grasp.

"BERSERKERS!" He shouted.

"Every able bodied fighter, grab a weapon and meet by the docks!" Stoick shouted orders.

Astrid was livid. She pitched her flowers to the side and ran to grab her axe. It had to be today of all days that she didn't have it attached to her hip. Dress or no dress, she sprinted from the hall, her fists swinging, and her teeth clenched. "Not on my wedding day." She growled fiercely.

Hiccup took up the sword he was to drive into the beam. If it could stick in the trunk of a tree, it could cleave a man's head from his shoulder.

And Hiccup was dangerously close to doing just that.

Hiccup was first to the docks, poised and ready to strike. Soon, the rest of the village backed him up. Men with hammers and axes, teens with dragons, and women with kitchen utensils.

While the ships were still a few feet away from the docks, Hiccup could plainly see his enemy, in all of his crooked glory.

The teen Berserker bore his eyes into Hiccup, a meaty smile tearing at his cheeks and a malicious fire in his eyes. His beak-like nose crinkled as he sneered and nefarious laughter bubbled up in his throat.

Stoick lowered his weapon to begin diplomate the situation, but Hiccup beat him to it.

"You aren't welcome here!" He shouted, voice full of hate.

"Wart my friend!" Dagur replied, blowing off his comment. "You look well."

"Did you not hear me, Dagur!? You are not welcomed here!" He raised his sword and gripped it hard enough to make his knuckles bleed.

"Is this about the Atolls? Because I didn't think you'd mind. After all, you and I had that conversation over dinner one night, you were held captive by those people. Aren't you glad it's gone?"

In a way, he was right, he was kind of glad to see the buildings go up in smoke, but innocent people were slaughtered. "You had no right!" He spat.

"There you go with your righteous condemnation!" Dagur laughed. "One of your best qualities, to be sure!" He grew much more serious. "We come here in peace, really. You know I respect you, Wart, the last thing I want is this to turn ugly."

Wart lowered his sword ever so slightly. "What is your business? If you are coming for a casual chat, I can assure you, today is the most inopportune for that."

"I'm here for Savage." The chief said. "He and I made a deal. I would ransack the Atolls while you and your posse came to arrange a treaty with Berk. He owes me for holding up my end of the deal."

"And this payment, would it, by chance, be dragon eggs?"

"Nightfury eggs!" He shouted. "The most rare and beautiful of them all! I'm going to raise up an army of Nightfurys, and then the whole world will know the might of Dagur the Deranged!"

Hiccup's eyebrow twitched. "It won't work." He stated.

"Oh come on!" Dagur exasperated. "I know your policy about peace and joy and all that other crap, but I promise to leave you alone!"

"No, I meanâ€¦" Then he turned to the crowd. "Where's Fishlegs?"

"H-Here!" The chubby boy called.

"Do you have an egg on you?"

"What, just because I was utterly fascinated by them, do you think I

would carry one around with me?"

He took Hiccup's silence as a yes.

"Fine." He fished the obsidian out of his pouch.

Wart turned back to the Berserkers. "Here!" He shouted and chucked it.

Dagur easily caught it and examined it. "So, what about it?"

"Break it open!"

"No way! That'll kill it! I need it alive!"

"It won't kill it, because it's already dead!"

"WHAT?!"

"It's petrified! Savage lied to you!"

Mortified, Dagur whacked the egg against the hull of the ship, and swung at it with an axe. Nothing but solid glass.

"Where is the little weasel now?!" He shouted.

"He's in our prison." Stoick answered.

"Allow us to dock! No one tricks Dagur!" The deranged teen called from the boat.

Still on edge, Hiccup narrowed his eyes. "Call off your armanda, and then we'll talk!"

So Dagur waved his arms and sent his captain off. The ships went a distance off and then anchored.

The main ship pulled into port and Dagur hopped onto the dock.

"I'm angry, my brother." Dagur stated, coming up to grasp Hiccup's hand. "But my anger is not with you. What is his sentence?"

Hiccup pursed his lips. "He's to be executed in two days."

Dagur's spirits were instantly lifted as he clapped his friend's arms. "Why wait? Let's take care of him! Together!"

Wart gripped his shoulder. "You know how I feel about death. I know there's no return for this man, and that it'll be safer for everyone if he is put to death. But I don't want to be the one to do it. If you want to, so be it. Go take care of this grudge, and then please, get out of my home."

"Oh Wart, always to the point. These people look like they're ready to celebrate something! Why not the death of a traitor!?" He shook the teen. "Bring Savage to the kill ring! This will be memorable! We'll make it a fight to the death!" He called to his men.

Hiccup sighed in defeat. There was just no pleasing the man.

Dagur passed by Stoick as he made himself at home on the island. He gave the man a once over and gave him a half-hearted smile. "Sorry for your loss."

Stoick rolled his eyes. If only he knewâ€¦

The tension between Dagur and Hiccup was well-known throughout the Archipelago, as their never ending war brought in allies of all different types. They had once been friends. Well, Dagur lived in the delusion that they had been friends. Upon the _retirement_ of Dagur's father, Osvald the Agreeable, Dagur's bloodthirsty nature wasn't warranted by the Hooligan's, and their treaty fell apart; especially since Dagur insisted them to sign in Dragon's blood. Alvin had been on both sides, too, as Dagur betrayed his trust and, using a Skrill, struck him by lightning. Everyone assumed he was dead until he showed up on Berk, seeking revenge on Dagur.

The disgruntled teen was in love with Toothless, more or less, the idea of riding him into battle, or mounting his head on a wall. Yes, ever since Dagur spotted the Nightfury, he was obsessed with owning it. The fact that little, defenseless Hiccup was able to _control_ him made his blood boil and incited a hate towards the boy. For a while, Dagur had stayed away from Berk, as he had to rectify his alliance with the Outcasts, after the whole Skrill incident. But then, trader Johan brought the news that Hiccup had been missing for months. The young chief was elated that the boy was gone, but still, that meant for him:

No Nightfury.

So, it was very important that Dagur assumed that Wart was, well, Wart. If he came to know his true identity, things would dirty, fast.

As the news about the wedding being replaced with a brawl spread, everyone scattered to get their supplies needed for spectating the event. The last to disperse from the crowd was Astrid, still wearing her pale blue wedding dress, her bridal crown, and looking as livid as ever with the axe firmly in her grasp.

Dagur spotted her and realization came over him. He had seen Wart wielding a ceremonial sword, but didn't think much of it. But now it made sense. He turned to Hiccup and laughed. "Now I see why you said this was an inopportune day. If I had known you were reentering slavery, I would have come earlier."

"Hold me back," Astrid spat as she came towards Dagur.

"Can't, you hold me back." Hiccup returned.

Stoick grabbed them both. "We're already on edge of a war. If everything goes well, we can finish the ceremony tonight and then you'll have a funny story to tell your kids some day."

Hiccup sighed, but amended. Astrid was much more inclined to tighten the grip on her axe. "One false moveâ€¦" She growled.

They met at the academy, once dubbed the kill ring, as that was the place that dragon battles were held. Enough blood was split here to last generations.

Why not add a few more pints?

Stoick presided over the event, sitting in his usual chair. Hiccup to his right, then Astrid to his right. She pivoted her axe on the point of the blade.

Snotlout took up a seat nearby. "Oh man, this is going to be so brutal! I love watching Dagur fight! He holds nothing back."

Astrid replied, "Knowing the opponents, this will be over quickly."

Then Hiccup added, "Knowing Dagur, this won't be simple." He then stood. "I'll be back before it starts."

Resigned, Hiccup went down to the ring entrance where Savage was awaiting his downfall. His good arm was fitted with a shield, obviously, not able or allowed to handle a weapon.

"Leave us." Wart commanded the guards.

They gave each other a look before departing. Wart crossed his arms as he looked at his previous commander.

"What?" Asked Savage, disdainfully.

"Why did you have him burn the Atolls? And why, of all the bloodthirsty vikings on the Archipelago, did you have to enlist Dagur the Deranged?"

Savage, for once in his pitiful existence, actually looked remorseful. "We came to that decision before you told me what plans you had for me. It was supposed to stir up dissension, and turn the survivors on you. You would be seen as incapable of protecting your people, and they would want me instead. Butâ€¦"

"Kinda backfired, didn't it?"

Savage lowered his gaze. "Yeah."

"You're the most idiotic individual I have ever encountered."

"I'm well aware of that, sire."

"Any last words, then?"

Savage managed a smile and said, "Long live the Outcasts."

Hiccup shook his head, scornfully.

"Oh, and congratulations on your wedding. Sorry to see it interrupted."

"Well, at least someone's paying for it." He stated haphazardly, turning around. "Try to make it at least a little entertaining, will you?" With that, he left the man to his fate.

Hiccup settled back into his seat with a sigh. Across the arena, he saw his large black friend and Toothless settle next to each other to

watch the battle. He could of sworn he saw Dagur looking at his Nightfury. "Oh Odinâ€¦" He muttered.

Savage was shoved into the ring, and the gate closed with a clang. Stoick stood up, "The battle between Dagur and Savage begins. This fight will end in a death. Hopefully, for our prisoner." Then he sat back down. "Just make it quick."

Savage raised his shield ready to fight for his life.

If only he had a chance.

Dagur charged at him, shrieking like lunatic. Savage braced his leg back, but Dagur's sword embedded itself into the shield. With only one arm for support, his shield pressed against him, the point going all the way through.

The deranged fighter yanked his weapon down harshly, dislodging the shield, and then pulled up, pulling the buckler off his arm, and into the dirt.

Savage only had seconds, but it was not enough. As his mind raced for an escape, Dagur took the opening and plunged.

Hiccup turned his face away.

It was all over. Savage slumped to the ground, blood beginning to pool around him. Dagur raised his blade and jovially laughed. He then brought it down again, cutting into the dead man over and over.

"Enough!" Stoick called, disgusted. "You've had your fun. It's over."

"Just a moment, Stoick!" Dagur called, excited. "You have something I want, something that you no longer need, and something I've wanted for a long time."

"Oh noâ€¦" Hiccup whispered, knowing exactly what he was going to ask for.

"I want the Nightfury!"

Stoick stood and shouted back. "Toothless is Hiccup's. He is a part of our tribe, and I will not give him away."

Hiccup could at least be grateful that his father would try to protect Toothless.

Dagur dragged his thumb over his blade, wiping the blood off. "I see. Let's compromise." He smirked. "You hand over the Nightfury, or I will take it by force and turn Berk into the Atolls." He tossed his sword to his other hand. "Seems pretty fair, right?"

Astrid felt an awful sinking feeling in her chest as Wart stood and gestured for Stoick to stand down. He looked to Dagur with determination in his eyes.

"I will fight you for him."

20. Perilous

Almost done with school! Just a few more days! That's why it's a late update.

Also, I'm beta-ing a story for my good friend Hapciuovici, called _A New Legend. _You should check it out!

* * *

><p>It was their wedding day. Couldn't it have just stayed that way? Astrid was glad that the whole problem with Savage and Dagur was being finished in one fail swoop, but why did it have to come to this?<p>

Sadly, if she was to ask him to choose between her and Toothless, the answer was obvious. Astrid had been cruel to him for years. But Toothlessâ€|the bond between Dragon and boy was infrangible. He had always been there for the boy, even when no one else was. They depended on each other, trusted each other, loved each other. It was if they were twins, separated at birth and by species. No, they were soul mates. Astrid knew there was an unspoken agreement between the two, to protect each other, no matter what.

Dagur snickered. "You want to fight me? Do you remember what happened the last time?"

"The last time," Wart implored, "was a friendly spar. Lives are on the line, Dagur."

"Fine. I'll play your game. But I get to pick the condition of the fight."

"What are your conditions?"

Dagur beamed. "No shields, no armor, only one weapon." He laughed. "Oh, and no dragons."

Astrid and Stoick looked to the boy, mortified, as he agreed, "Deal."

He stood, his footsteps lingering as a fear bubbled up in his chest. Yet, he would not back down.

Astrid followed behind, dutifully. A buzzing went through the crowd, everyone getting excited.

The four teens in the stands were silent.

Down by the gate to the arena, Toothless and Mwaba were already waiting. The giant held out a hilt of a sword, but that was all it was, a hilt. It was reminiscent of a dragon's head, it's mouth open.

"I brought yoo Inferna, t'ought yoo might need et."

"Thanks, Mwaba, but no. I'm not going to take a weapon in."

Astrid grabbed his arm. "You said it yourself, the last time you

faced him, it was for fun. He has something to fight for now. He won't go easy on you."

"I have something to fight for too." With that, he removed his jacket and shirt, folded them up, and set them on the ground. "Astrid, if something goes wrong, please take care of Toothless."

"I will." She said softly. "Justâ€¦promise me it won't go wrong." She repeated her promise from the day he was to fight the Monstrous Nightmare. Everything did go wrong back then as well.

He didn't answer. Toothless nudged against his waist, eliciting a low whine from his throat. Soundlessly, the teen reach out a hugged his loyal friend. "It's gonna be okay, bud."

Toothless nuzzled against his shoulder.

"I'm waiting!" Shouted Dagur, seeing the shadows in the entryway. The crowd was getting restless as well, cheering, "Wart! Wart! Wart!"

Hiccup let go of Toothless, but not without a kiss to his snout. Then he turned to Mwaba. "Nilipo Mluzi, mimi nataka wewe kufungua mlango." _When I whistle, I want you to open the gate_.

Mwaba nodded heavily.

Finally, he held up his hand to Astrid and she grasped it heartily. "You're not going at this alone."

"I never was." He grinned. He pulled away and stepped forward. "Okay."

Dagur leered at the approaching figure. This was it, one last causality, and then the Nightfury would be his. After all, this kid didn't hold a candle to his fighting skills. And above all, he finally would see the face of his opponent.

Of course, his smirk disappeared when Wart stepped into the light, helmet in place. Dagur sneered, "I'm fairly certain I said no armor." He indicated to his own head, sans horned helmet.

Wart was silent and still as the grave. His hands went to the leather, and undid the clasps.

The crowd sat forward in their seats in anticipation.

His helmet hit the ground with a soft 'pac'. Then, it was as if time stood still. Mass silence came over everyone as Dagur studied his face. He came closer, narrowing his eyes. Like Alvin, he was blinded by his view of the runt that Hiccup was.

This young man was strong, brave, and a leader. Hiccup was not. This man had a sharp chin, piercing gaze, broad shoulders, and the scars of a rough life. He was different, but why did they look so similar?

Dagur started to chuckle. "This is going to sound crazy." Well, it _was_ Dagur whom was speaking. "But...you look an awful lot like..."

Oh.

Oh.

Wart showed up on Outcast island around the same time Hiccup disappeared. He was getting married to that blonde girl that Hiccup liked. He was fighting for _his_ dragon. It was so obvious, how in Odin's name had he missed it?

Wide-eyed, he stared at the boy. Yes, there was no mistaking it now. Those doofy looking teeth, that big nose, the scar on his chin, and those expressive eyes!

He tilted his head and scrunched up his nose. "Hiccup?"

The teen in mention pursed his lips. "Hello Dagur."

Dagur screamed. _Screamed_. "YOU!" And then burst into uncontrollable laughter that made his eyes roll back into his head. "Hiccup! Hiccup, you clever little troll! You disgusting, evil, tricky little bug! You came back from the dead! Hiding your identity from your village!? What is wrong with you!? And I thought_ I_ was deranged!" No doubt, he found the whole situation extremely amusing. He called to the chief, "Did you know about this, Stoick!? Did you know about your son's cowardice?!"

Stoick said nothing.

It was then that the crowd came out of initial shock and began yelling at Hiccup, but not in ridicule. "Get out of there! Save yourself! You don't have to do this!" The fear of losing him again was mutual all over the village. No one even paid mind that he was in disguise, just that he was going up to face a madman.

As Dagur threw jibes, Hiccup did his best to ignore each and every one. He stood firmly in his spot, his eyes riveted to his opponent.

"So, did you think I wouldn't find out eventually? Because, you and I have a score to settle!"

"That's what we're doing now." Hiccup remarked.

"Ooo! I'm shaking in my boots! You're so intimidating now, Hiccup!"

"Only now? Hmm, never stopped me from threatening you before." His old wit had returned to him, especially since Dagur was so easy to play off of.

Dagur cleared his throat of mirth and raised his sword, "Surrender!"

"You wish to surrender? Very well, I accept your defeat."

"Where's your weapon?" Dagur chuckled.

"Don't need it." He shrugged.

"Um, did you miss that this is supposed to be a fight to the _death_?"

"We'll see."

Dagur's good nature started to fade. "Are you mocking me?"

Hiccup rolled his shoulder. "Whatever gave you that impression?"

The warrior's nose flared. "If you think you can play your stupid mind games on me, then forget it! That Nightfury is mine."

"If you say so." He responded casually.

"That doesn't bug you at all?"

Hiccup turned the question right around and said, "Are you enjoying your haircut?"

Dagur's eyebrow twitched. "When I said one weapon, I meant something other than your _brain_, Hiccup!"

The teen chortled, as he began to loosen up and take a few steps inside the arena. "It is duly noted and well known that I possess an extortionate intelligence level in comparison with you, but no, I figured you would not factor my astuteness as a weapon, so I have an advantage."

"How? You just said you didn't have a weapon!"

"No, I said I didn't need it. Totally different."

"Now you're just messing with me!"

He was. "I thought you enjoyed our witty banter?"

Dagur threw up his nose. "Talking is boring! Now we fight!" Without any other warning, he ran at Hiccup, dragging his blade against the stone floor. Hiccup had mere seconds to prepare for the attack. He leaned his weight back on his good leg and evaded the uppercut. The sword pivoted and came around, but once again he avoided it.

Hiccup possessed a happy facilitation for escaping imminent death. When one was big and broad, they could be knocked down and easily bounce back. For Hiccup, not so. If he so much as got bumped, he could be down for the count. In normal viking standards, he was fragile. During the days of dragon raids, he got very good at narrowly slipping past running men with weapons and hands grabbing at him to throw him back inside.

During his servanthood on the main island, he got even more practice as the Outcasts liked to throw things at each other for fun. Of course, since they liked him and accepted him, he had to dodge axes, hammers, and stray mead mugs.

At this moment, all the practice he had was coming into play. Each movement was fluid, not anywhere near graceful, but for the most part, effective. The only thing not taken into account was his growth. Since he wasn't so agile now, he was faced with an occasional nick or cut. Nothing severe at least.

Dagur was becoming increasingly frustrated as none of his blows landed. "Stand still so I can kill you!"

"Not happening!" Hiccup responded. His plan was working, to get Dagur worked up and angry so he lost control of his movements and used too much energy. Still, it was risky. The attacks that he would unleash would be devastating.

The crowd was so enraptured in anxiety for Hiccup, that they forgot to cheer him on. They sat silent and pensive, listening for every grunt and swoop of Dagur's sword. The only sound was Pippin crying on Gobber's lap.

The deranged teen soon realized that if he wanted to win, he would have to change tactics. Hiccup would last much longer than him if this kept up.

A sword was easy to miss, but not so a whole body. Dagur threw himself at Hiccup, knocking him off balance, and then caught him up in a choke hold, the sword lingering by his neck.

"DA!" Pippin shouted from the stands.

Dagur was irate. "Will somebody shut that creature up?!"

It was Hiccup's turn to be angry. "That's my son!" He barked, prying at the arm that held him. He tensed and threw his hips back, his heels digging into the ground. His tailbone ramped into Dagur's groin and his grip loosened. Hiccup spun out of the hold and elbowed him at the base of his ribcage. When Dagur leaned in on reflex, the teen placed his hands on the back of Dagur's head and bashed his face into his knee.

Hiccup retreated a few steps as the older fighter panted and wiped the blood from his face.

"Who much will it take?" Hiccup asked him, poised and ready to dodge. "How much are you willing to take before you're satisfied?"

Dagur came at him again, this time, more sloppy. "I take what's given to me!"

Hiccup danced away from the weapon as Dagur thrust it into the open air. "So you want my Nightfury. Will that make you happy? Or will you need more?"

"I'm not listening!"

"How vast will your thirst for power grow? Do you want to continue down this path? You can have everything you want, but be totally alone. You'll live in fear, because you'll have no friends, no allies. Everyone will hate you. All for the sake of power!"

"Shut up!" In a frenzied state, Dagur screwed his eyes shut and whipped the sword around, anger rolling off of him like smoke.

Hiccup's next plan of action would require much more effort. He needed to come in close, making it hard for Dagur to attack.

While his agitated attack commenced, Hiccup snaked in and struck him in the neck with the edge of his hand, knocking the wind out of him. Dagur swung his arm out and shoved Hiccup to the side, then nailed him hard in the gut with the hilt of his sword.

The younger teen tasted iron from the hit and gasped to get air. Dagur recovered and lurched, bringing the tip of his blade around. Hiccup saw the movement and flung himself backwards. The sharp edge made its landing, skirting across Hiccup's cheek and leaving a blood trail in its wake. It overlapped the scar from their last fight, and ran all the way back to scratch against his earring and slice off a lock of fine hair.

The insane fighter lunged forward and tossed his shoulder into Hiccup's chest, tossing him to the ground harshly.

"**I'm going to kill you!**" Dagur screamed, raising the blade.

In a last ditch effort, Hiccup kicked up to block the blunt. The sword made contact with his shin, and with a loud pang, broke in half.

Dagur looked bewildered at his broken weapon. "Whatâ€|?"

"Ha!" Laughed Hiccup, unsure if his leg would hold up against the attack. Sure enough though, the metal slabs he had gotten from a trader from Sparta had been worth it. Light and durable, and able to break an iron sword. Fascinating.

Dagur, coming to his senses, saw the gratifying smirk on his opponent's face and shouted. He brought the lasting half of the sword down to strike, but Hiccup threw his arms up in an X-shape and caught him by the wrists. Swiftly, the auburn teen rolled his own wrists upwards and grasped the blade, then twisted and disarmed him. Sure, the blade was sharp and slit his palms, but it was out of the hands of the madman.

Dagur's fingers wiggled in wonder. How had that happened?

Hiccup had distracted him and unarmed him, now it was just a matter of ending the fight. He once again kicked out, but after getting momentum from pivoting on his good foot, and swept Dagur's feet out from under him.

The leader of the Berserker's found his vision blurry for a moment after he hit his head. But when he refocused, he was staring at a jagged blade aimed right between the eyes. He was pinned to the ground by a firm foot on his chest.

"Stand down." Hiccup's voice was ragged with panting breath.

"No." Dagur refused.

The blade dove to the left, slicing his cheek. "Stand down!" He urged, harsher.

"Never!" Dagur called again.

The blade danced right and pierced his eye. Dagur attempted to get

up, but Hiccup leaned in closer and pressed harder on his chest. His eyes shone with the wild fire of brutality. Blood seeped from his pores like sweat. His tone was like a serpent, hissing quietly in warning as he dictated on last time, "stand down."

"You'll have to kill me." Dagur spat.

It should have been simple. Drive the sword into Dagur and kill him, and by that, simultaneously rid the archipelago of one of the greatest threats to peace, save his tribe, and keep Toothless safe.

If the idea was so simple, why were his hands shaking with unease? He wanted to kill Dagur, he really did. After all, the lunatic had tried to kill him on more than one occasion. It would be better this way.

Still, Hiccup had never killed anyone before. Even in this brutal world of Vikings, he had never purposefully hurt a human being. His only death, to anything, was the Red Death, and there was no avoiding that.

But this was a human. He had a heart and a soul...somewhere deep down inside. Never the less, Hiccup was pensive. Would killing Dagur make him a murderer?

Dagur grinned a terrible, meaty smile. "Come on, kill me. Kill me!" He egged.

Hiccup's nose flared, but his hands held fast. Dagur did this on purpose. If he couldn't have his army or even a single Nightfury, he wanted Hiccup to suffer in his soul. He knew how he felt about killing. He wanted to bring him to such inner conflict, such compromise, he would feel it for years to come.

Hiccup grit his teeth. It was decided, he would do it. Right between the eyes. It would be easy.

Wait.

What was he thinking?

So what if this was best? So what if this stopped Dagur for good? Sooner or later, another evil would arise, and then what? Would he kill him, too? Would he justify murder over and over until his hands were stained with blood? Did he have the right to judge the actions of another? To condemn them to death?

He hated the fact he had to justify his actions.

"What in Thor's name are you waiting for, son?!" Shouted Stoick from the stands.

Resolved, Hiccup clutched the knife tighter. "Fine." He knew what had to be done. He raised the blade, and plunged.

The broken sword tore through bone and muscle, snapping ligaments like rubber bands. The target was his shoulder, and it hit its mark. The blade went all the way through and struck into the ground, pinning him to the stone floor like a insect with a pin. Dagur

squealed like a pig, in pain.

Hiccup stood. He turned and sauntered away, not sparing another glance.

"Where are you going?!" Howled the boy from the ground, unable to move. "Get back here!"

"I'm getting my weapon!" He called back. Then he stuck two fingers in his mouth and whistled.

The gate opened, Mwaba following Hiccup's signal.

Astrid hurried out, towards her husband, still in her gown, axe in hand. She was enraged, "what are you doing?! Aren't you going toâ€"..."

He stared at her with a desperate look and completed her sentence. "Finish him."

Dagur heard and protested. "This was between us! No one else!"

"Dagur," his voice was even. "My weapon," he turned back slightly, "is my wife."

Hiccup took three staggering steps back to the gate as he listened to Astrid's angry footfalls. They were quick, like taps, and it was like she was barely touching the ground. A sound came from her lips, starting like a growl, and then turned into a scream.

Dagur, for once in his life, felt the fear of a hundred men. Sanity washed over him, only in his last breath. And with that breath, he called for his father.

Thwack.

At that sound, Hiccup's knees grew weak and his legs buckled under him. Before he hit the ground, his weight collapsed on sleek, black, muscle and scales. A warm huff came from the beast as tears leaked from Hiccup's eyes. A mutual feeling passed over both boy and dragon, as an unsaid message was understood.

Thank you.

When Hiccup came too, he was laying in bed. His eyes crusty from the guilty tears. Bandaged and sore, he took in his surroundings, just idly letting his eyes gaze about. He was in his home, according to the drawings on the walls. A weight was on his chest, the weight of Toothless' head resting and waiting patiently for him to awaken. The dragon had fallen asleep, regretfully, as his weight made it difficult to move.

The sound of paper flipping was what got Hiccup's attention. At his side was his ever watchful bride, a book in her hands as she sat calmly on the bed, her back on the headboard. Her face had a small, pulling smile, one that was tell tale of melancholy. He knew why too, the book in her hands was a temporary sketchbook he had toted around while he was with the Outcasts. In times when he was alone, he would practice drawing those from Berk who he missed. Only from memory.

When he came home, he compared the drawings to the subjects, only to find that his memories of them were skewed and fuzzy.

He had forgotten what they looked like.

Astrid no doubt had noticed this, and that's what made it so heart breaking. He cleared his throat, which was dry.

She glanced over, a calm look on her face. "Well, look who's finally wake."

Dread came over him. The last things he remembered were gruesome and sobering. Trying to push it aside, he asked, "How long have I been asleep?"

Her eyebrow twitched. "Two weeks."

"_What?!_" He nearly leapt from the bed, jostling Toothless awake. The dragon grumbled.

Astrid chuckled lightly. "I'm kidding! Calm down." She rested a hand on his shoulder to ease him to recline. "It's only been a few hours. It's not even tomorrow yet."

Relieved, he heaved a sigh and relaxed into the pillow. "What happened?"

She shut the book and set it on the beside table. "I don't exactly know. Afterâ€"â€|well, you know...I went to consult you, but you were out cold on Toothless' snout. No one could wake you."

"I must have passed out." Just the thought of that axe falling made him feel dizzy. He reached a hand to his head, only to find both of them wrapped thickly and reminiscent of oven mitts.

"The blade cut you deep when you pulled it away from Dagur. But that's really your only injury."

Toothless was now up and trying to subtly make himself comfortable. It wasn't really working, as he was much too big for space left on the bed.

Hiccup giggled. "Here Bud, let's do this." He groaned as he sat up, his muscles aching with soreness. It was all that twisting and evading that did it. He scooted back so he could rest with his back against the headboard, like Astrid. With more room, Toothless rested his head on Hiccup's stomach and went back to sleep.

Astrid relaxed into his side. He waited for her to rebuke him, to say he had been stupid for so many different reasons, to remind him of his promise to be more careful, but she didn't. Instead, she rested her hands on his and said, "That was very brave of you."

"Stupid, though, right? Pretty dumb, huh?"

"Not this time." She patted the bandages. "I wasn't worried."

"Really?"

"You weren't about to let him take Toothless. You cared too much."

"So you aren't going to call me stupid and reckless?"

She leaned in and gingerly kissed his forehead. "No."

"Not even for going in without a weapon?"

She shook her head. "There may have been a time when I considered it foolish, but that would be me comparing it to what I would do. Lately, I've learned that you have a different way with dealing with things. A way that's simple, but pure, that no one else would think of."

He watched her carefully, as she was full of uncharacteristic tenderness.

"You're strength amazes me."

He quirked an eyebrow. "Are you sure you're talking about me? I'm fairly certain anyone on this island could beat me in a feat of strength."

"I meant on the inside. You wouldn't let yourself be compromised, even when he was egging you on. As seen, I wouldn't have been able to do that."

"See, I see it the other way around. I wanted to kill him. I wanted to plant that sword in his brain. But I couldn't. It would be the honorable thing, killing him instead of making him live with defeat, but I couldn't justify it. No matter how hard I tried, it was still a life, and it wasn't mine to take." He sighed. "By the way, I'm not saying this to make you feel guilty."

"Dagur never had respect for me. Even when we were at peace those years ago. I had no qualms about what I did. He had to be stopped."

"Right."

Astrid rested her head on his shoulder. "He's gone now, and it doesn't matter anymore."

"What about the armada? He had a dozen ships sitting in the bay."

"Did you know he had a twin sister?"

His stunned silence was her answer.

"Her name is Agatha. She's been in the background the whole time, but she's very quiet. Stoick spoke with her and they came to an agreement."

"Which was...?"

"We aren't allies, since we killed Dagur. But she signed a treaty of peace as an apology for her brother's behavior."

He breathed a sigh of relief. "So that's that."

"After that, everyone just kind of fell into a lull. I can bet you're going to be swarmed with questions when you get out there."

"I'd rather stay in here, thank you very much."

"You'll have to face them eventually."

"I know, but for now, I just want to rest."

"Okay," she amended, sitting up.

He touched her arm. "Would you stay?"

She smiled and kissed him tenderly. "Until you fall asleep."

Thankful, he rested against her shoulder. Softly, she smoothed his hair to lull him to sleep. But even after he was out, she stayed, not wanting to be apart from him.

21. Resolution

So, technically, this is the last chapter! Sob! But, I am planning on an epilogue, and then we'll go from there. This chapter has fully convinced me to have a viking style wedding, because it's just so awesome. Anyone want to be the groom?

Please pardon inaccuracies.

* * *

><p>Let's try this again. Sunrise. A peaceful time of morning, when most villagers were just waking up. For Berk's hero, it was calm and quiet. But nothing could prepare him for the rude awakening he was about to receive.<p>

The blankets were ripped off. Cold water splashed on him, and a hammer clanged loudly on a pot. Hiccup bolted from the bed like it had personally harmed him. "What in Odin's beardâ€™!?" He shouted.

Evil cackling was his reward. "Time's a-wasting lover-boy!"

"Yeah, wouldn't want to miss your wedding! Uh, again!"

"You're already in hot water! Or cold water, as the case may be."

Shaking himself into the present. Hiccup's gaze landed on the smug faces of Ruff, Tuff, and Snotlout.

"What is wrong with you people!? I almost die, and I don't even get to sleep in!?" He snapped his fingers. "Rude!"

"Oh, come on you big baby! It's your big day! Got to have plenty of time to get ready!" Snotlout giggled. With that, the three pranksters hurried from his room.

He figured that since that was his last night sleeping alone, the trio decided it was their last chance to prank him like that. Try dumping a bucket of cold water on Astrid and your family would be planning a funeral pyre.

Hiccup looked over to Toothless, who was awake, but barely. He heard the group come in, but saw no threat. Instead, he watched with dull interest as chaos ensued. Hiccup rolled his eyes at the dragon. "Toothless? I should have called you _Useless_."

The dragon stood and sauntered over.

"Aw, don't come crying to me, big baby boo."

Toothless, instead, made sure he had a nice slathering of saliva on his face. _Congratulations, by the way_.

Hiccup wiped it off and shook it onto the floor. "Well, now that I _am_ awake, I might as well get ready." He stood, and instantly he knew it was going to be a long day. "Oh sweet Odin's nipple that hurts!" Every muscle in his body burned. He was _so sore!_

Toothless nudged him, to help him move, seeing the stiffness that enveloped him. Still, Hiccup stepped around and looked at the soaked bed. He sighed and gathered the sheets. He knew that when Astrid brought her trousseau with her at the end of the reception, her party would be fitting the bed with furs and flowers. The wood would hopefully be dry by then. He draped his sheets partly out the window to dry.

Then he wormed out of his soaked trousers, not really mad that they were wet, since well, they were covered with blood, dirt, and sweat from the previous day's battle. He laid them beside the bed sheets.

Going to his meager wardrobe, he donned his second best pants and the shirt he had discarded yesterday before the fight, a black satin tunic with pearls and silk embroidering the trim. As he sat down to don his boots, he looked at his feet. Specifically his prosthetic.

Everyone knew now, no reason to hide any part of his identity. From his chest in the corner, he removed a dagger and trimmed the bottom of his trousers, fully exposing his amputation. He then pulled out his new and uniquely designed prosthetic. The leg was created much like a swiss army knife. His foot could be exchanged in three different parts, one walking foot with cleats, one for ice, and a hook design for riding. The fixed mount was followed by a rotary cuff with a spring loaded coil on the inside, which released the new foot while accepting the old. The new feet were almost blade like in comparison with his other foot. It would make it lighter and faster to walk, while not having to worry about a gyrating ankle.

He stood and got adjusted to the change of weight.

"Not bad." He evaluated.

Toothless gave a low rumble.

"What?" Asked the boy looking at him.

The dragon had a wild look in his eyes.

The wedding wasn't until high noon. He had done everything needed to prepare yesterday, no it was just a matter of killing time. He gave his friend a sideways glance. "Wanna go for a flight?"

Immediately, Toothless was bounding around the room like a frisky kitten.

"Alright! Let's see, our gear is out backâ€¦" As he traveled down the stairs, he stopped as he noticed something sitting on the table.

His helmet.

Somebody had brought it back after the fight. The symbol, as Dagur so eloquently put it, of his cowardice. His security blanket, his protection. There was no need for it now, but even the thought of walking out that door without it made him uneasy. He had altered in age. Scars on his face, exhaustion clear in his cheeks. He wasn't so sure about having everyone suddenly looking at him and seeing his old self, the weak little twerp, beaten and shaped from a rough life. He much rather keep the mysterious air that he had been accustomed to.

But it wasn't what Astrid wanted.

He picked up the helmet and wiped the dirt from the side of it. He felt Toothless next to him and responded, without looking at him, "Just a second, bud."

With a solemn smile, he returned to the loft with his armor and placed it in the chest of his memories. "Goodbye old friend." And with that, he locked the chest.

â€¦

Astrid loved her mother deeply, but she was_ so_ grateful for the reprieve. She had spent, at most, ten minutes picking flowers for her bouquet the day before. Then, in her nerves and later rage, she had all but pulverized the field flowers. So, she had to pick a new bouquet.

And if that got her away from the overwhelming questions from her family, then Odin be praised. The baths had been hard enough. Where as last time, the conversation had been mostly over her head, this time, she was the center of attention. And she should have been, rightfully. It was her wedding day after all. But it was _too much_.

"What does he look like now? He's seem so much taller! Is he still clumsy? Is he okay in the head? What happened while he was gone? How is he chief?" Etc. They actually wouldn't let her have a word in, edge wise.

So now she was at peace. With Stormfly, she had flown to a more secluded, but wild glen, erupting in wildflowers. This time, she would take her sweet time and make a very elegant collection.

Astrid wasn't one for flowers. Her skirt was decorated with skulls, not petals. She carried an axe, not the laundry. She was the opposite of a flower toting fairy. If anything, she was a goddess of war. But in this moment, on this very special day, she supposed she could make an exception. As she strolled through the pinks and roses, and she savored the columbine, she felt a soft peace drape on her rugged soul.

She would soon be a wife.

While at any other part of her life, the thought would have made her shudder in disgust, it did nothing but make her giggle in delight. She delicately plucked poppies, lilacs, bachelor buttons, and lilies, not knowing what they all were, but liking the soft colors.

She was so focused on the flora, however, that she did not hear the slight whistling of an approaching nightfury. Suddenly, she was snatched up, her flowers fluttering to the ground. In a whirl, she found herself sitting in Hiccup's lap sideways as he flew overhead.

"Oh hey, look what I found."

She rolled her eyes at him. "What on earth are you doing?"

"Toothless needed to get out."

"We aren't supposed to see each other."

"What? Who said? That might be troublesome."

She hit him. "You know what I meant!"

"I do. But I figured it was going to be a long time before I got you to myself, so I decided to kidnap you."

"You'll have me all night, so put me down. I need to finish picking my flowers."

"Come on Astrid. If I remember correctly, you were always pulling me away from forge work to go exploring or whatever."

"Yes, but forge work is not the same as wedding preparation."

"Just one lap around the island."

She grinned at him, slyly. "Alright. Two because you're cute."

He beamed. "Then you better hang on."

When they finally landed, Hiccup was holding in laughter at her wind whipped hair. "Now I see why you keep it in a braid."

While she had been picking, her blonde locks had been tied in a loose bun that dangled, but in the flight, the band had unraveled. And now she looked like a hot mess.

She pushed her hair back. "Be happy that my mom hadn't done my hair yet, or you would be in a world of trouble."

He chuckled. "I'm sure I would be!" Then he smiled tenderly. "I apologize for sneaking up on you, milady."

She scoffed. "I wasn't surprised, if that's what your insinuating."

"I'm sure you weren't." He helped pick up her scattered flowers. "Doing anything later?"

She simpered. "Sorry, I'm busy."

"Darn." He kissed her cheek. "I'll guess I'll see you eventually."

"Oh, sooner or later." She cheeked.

He grinned, hopped on Toothless, and took off.

As she watched the black dragon fly away, a white spot caught her gaze out of the corner of her eye. Looking closer, she found a beautiful, full reinrose. The stem was just the right length as she plucked it and tucked it into her cluster. The perfect center. Maybe Hiccup's interruption hadn't been so wasteful after all.

Hiccup flew a bit longer still after his rendezvous with Astrid. It was while he was swooping over the ocean to the East of the island that he saw a ship coming towards Berk. As far as he knew, all of the guests that would be attending the wedding had already arrived.

And witnessed the embarrassment of yesterday, much to his chagrin.

Surely, this had be a foe. He tucked down low and steered Toothless towards the ship. "Let's see what's up."

As they came into sight from the crew, friendly cheers of greetings came from the ship. Among them was a Stoick-sized man that shouted. "Yo ho, dragon rider!" And raised his hands in salute.

Hiccup relaxed. They were friendly. "Hello!" He called back.

"Are you from Berk?"

"I am."

"Is there to be a wedding today?"

"There is. It starts in about in only a few hours."

"Then we haven't missed it!"

Hiccup neared the ship, gliding at level with the bow. He recognized the insignia on the sail and couldn't help but laugh. "So, how did the Gauls find out about this wedding?"

"We were sent a message about a week ago that there was to be a wedding of the Outcast chief and Berk's new heir. We are allies with both tribes, so we thought it would be best to attend."

His face was in clear sight to the Gauls and yet, no one seemed to recognize him. He was thankful for that at least.

Not so, for the dreamy looks he was receiving from Darla. Boy, this would be an interesting development.

He chuckled. "Well, it is to be my wedding that you'll be attending, but at the rate your going, you'll be late. Throw me a rope, we'll pull you."

Astrid knew there had been some hesitation on her parent's part to let her marry the Outcast leader. Even when Wart assured them that he could love and care for her, she still felt an inkling of doubt from them. And she was right, because now, before she took her spot on the alter, Mr. Hofferson drew her close to him and kissed both cheeks.

"My baby girl. Marrying the chief! I'm so proud!" He said teary-eyed.

She smirked. "So, now you're proud of me? Just because I'm marrying the chief?" There was the slightest amount of bitterness in her voice.

His smile didn't waiver. "Astrid, ever since you were little, I knew you were destined for greatness. Whether it was as a shield maiden or a Valkyrie. You had a fierce determination and an unparalleled heart for fellow men. Whatever you were going to do, you would do what was best for the tribe. Even if you didn't think so at the time."

He had believed that? Even when she had come home all those months ago and pledged that she most definitely would not marry Hiccup, because she didn't want the obligation. "Butâ€¦" She started.

"You knew you were going to." He nodded. "Marry Hiccup. You two were inseparable, time and distance only made your bond grow stronger. Astrid, your greatest accomplishment is not marrying Hiccup. It's being there for him. Helping him in his greatest time of need. He has a responsibility that is too much to take on alone. But with you by his side, guiding him, motivating him, I'm sure Berk will prosper beyond anyone's wildest dreams."

"Papaâ€¦"

He cupped her face. "I love you very much Astrid. But I have to let you go now."

Tears threatened her very existence as she bit her lip and answered. "I'll be in good hands."

It was then that her mother held out a wooden box. "I want you to have this. I wore it on my wedding day."

Astrid took the box and gently lifted the lid. Inside, on black velvet, laid a silver sterling necklace, inscribed with the Berk crest, and encrusted with stones of lapis lazuli. Her father delicately took it and clasped it around her neck. The charm laid against her collarbone and accented her bridal crown of volkerfrieden.

"What a beautiful young bride!" Mr. Hofferson sighed.

"Just wait until he lays his eyes on you!"

Astrid beamed at the pair that raised her. This part of her life was almost over. Soon, she would be waking up every morning to his face, eating meals with him, and even spending quiet evenings by the fire with him. It was a little heartbreaking, since this life was all she had ever known, but she needed to get out.

She needed to bloom.

Biting her lip in anticipation, Astrid took up her bouquet from the table. "I'm ready."

They led her to the great hall, where her mother went in first and waited up front. Her father patted her arm, to calm her nerves and then ushered her forward.

Hiccup's face said it all. His eyebrows were upturned, making wrinkles on his forehead. His eyes, wide with excitement, glassy. His nose crinkled, and his lips pulling into a tight, helpless, lovesick smile. Together, his features conveyed the perfect message.

You are the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

Just seeing his face, seeing him vulnerable, exposing himself in front of everyone, was enough to bring happy tears to her eyes. Just for today, she would let them run free.

Hiccup wasn't prepared for it. He saw her yesterday, in the same state she was supposed to be in now. But, somehow, she looked even more radiant than he could comprehend. The delicate yellow petals meshed with the gold in her hair, the white, with her porcelain skin. Her black lashes swept against her blushing cheeks, and her rose lips parted to reveal a smile of ecstasy.

It didn't matter if it wasn't manly, or tough, or the viking way, Hiccup gushed over his bride. He beamed, like the proudest man in the world that he would be marrying such a lovely creature. She made it up to him, and clasped his hand, still wrapped in bandages.

They stared at each other, silently giggling. He couldn't even tell her how beautiful he was, he was so full of joy.

Stoick started talking. He could hear the yammering going on, but Hiccup didn't hear a word of it. Instead, he marveled at the siren in front of him. And not too discreetly either. Astrid was slowly turning pink.

"Hiccup?" Stoick asked, grinning.

"Huh? Oh!" He snapped out of his trance and stood at attention. The chief held out the furs on which two swords laid. Hiccup took up the one he stole from his grandfather and held it out to his bride.

"Astrid, with this sword, I pledge my life to you. To serve and protect you all of my days. To cherish and love you, in darkness and joy, until the end of our days. I-I!" He swallowed, and then,

throwing caution to the wind, ad libbed the rest of the vow. "I've loved you for a long time. As long as I can rememberâ€¦actually. Back when I was a nobody, when no one put any faith in me, I really had no reason to go on. But, I persisted, because I wanted to impress you. I wanted to be your friend, for you to notice me." Then he beamed and managed to chuckle. "I think it worked." Then he finished, "This is my offering to you, a symbol of my devotion and my strength. Will you accept it?"

She nodded empathically and handed her flowers to her mother, then received the weapon. She placed it back on the furs, and then took up her own family sword. Holding it out with both hands, she began, "Hiccup, with this sword, I pledge my life to you. To serve and protect you all of my days. To cherish and love you, in darkness and in joy, until the end of our days." Nervously, she licked her lips and followed in his footsteps. "I had faith in you. You were never useless. I was glad that you always tried, no matter how badly it backfired. You've easily become my nearest and dearest friend. These last few months have been the scariest and most lonesome I have ever had. I missed you. Your smiles, your laughter, your stupid sarcasm. Andâ€¦" She sobbed. "I never want to go through that again. I love you too much Hiccup!" With finality, she proclaimed, "This is my offering to you, as a symbol of my family's faith in your pledge. Will you accept it?"

"Yes." He answered breathlessly. He took the weapon and laid it down.

Then it was time for the rings, which Stoick had as well. The swords and fur were laid aside and the rings were exchanged. Each one on the third finger. Hiccup raised her hand and placed a kiss on her knuckle. Then he whispered softly, "Are you okay?"

She giggled, "I'm fine, I just got emotional for a moment."

"I present our almost newly weds!" The chief shouted, cradling both kids by the shoulders. "Let the race begin!"

Cheering erupted from the audience as everyone became rowdy. Astrid's rugged nature came to light as she smirked at her beloved. "May the fastest viking win."

He looked surprised. "Astrid, you know I'm going to win, right?"

"_Excuse me?_"

"On your marksâ€¦"

Astrid tied up the bottom of her skirt, making it easier to run. "What makes you think you can beat me?"

Still astonished, he said, "I beat you before."

"Get setâ€¦"

"No, I let you win, because I wanted to see Snotlout cry like a little girl."

"Okay, well, whether or not you _let_ me win, I _have_ to win this

race."

"And why's that?" She challenged.

"GO!"

As he sped away from her, he shouted, "Because I'm the husband!"

Her nose flared and she easily caught up to him. "What's that supposed to mean!?"

They flew down the steps, each taking five at a time. "Whoever wins the race is the dominant in the marriage! I thought you knew this!?"

"There is no way in Helheim that you're beating me in a race of dominance, Haddock!"

"Astrid, you don't understand!"

"Don't use your mind games on me! It won't work!"

"You sound like Dagur!"

She gave him a look.

"Bad analogy. Sorry. But I promise you, if you don't let me win, you will embarrass yourself!"

"Fat chance! See you back at the great hall, sucker!" And like a speed demon, she booked it. Through the town square, past the forge, and out to the cliff face by the rampart. There, she grabbed the baton that symbolized the halfway point and then turned back. She passed her husband and stuck her tongue out at him.

Hiccup rolled his eyes.

She easily beat him. It wasn't even close. When she reached the great hall entrance, Snotlout and the twins were trying to hold back their laughter, while Fishlegs was openly snickering. Gobber had a sly grin on his face, and Stoick covered his face with his hand in embarrassment.

What was so funny?

Hiccup finally came up the steps, panting and red in the face. "Ugh, stairs."

She looked at him, desperate. He had been right, she did embarrass herself, but she wasn't quite sure why everyone was laughing at her.

He smirked at her, smugly.

Oh no. She had totally forgotten. The race was announced and she totally forgot about what happened afterwards. The winner of the race had to carry the loser through the threshold of the great hall.

She groaned. "I'm so stupid."

"I tried to warn you! But no!"

Stoick looked pointedly between the duo. "No do-overs."

Astrid sighed as she came to stand by her husband. "Good thing I'm marrying you and not Fishlegs."

Hiccup almost burst into uproarious laughter, but he held back, since Fishlegs was standing right there. "Here." He popped off his prosthetic and tossed it to Gobber to hold onto. Then he looped his arms around her neck.

It was a good thing that Astrid was so strong. She handled an axe and other robust weapons with ease. It was just a matter of Hiccup jumping into her arms, and her catching him in time.

She was solid, despite her face slowly turning red, but not from the strain.

"Be gentle." He whispered.

She almost flat out dropped him. But instead, she completed the last couple of steps into the hall. Hiccup kicked his good leg up, like an excited bride. The attendees clapped for the couple, especially for Astrid's feat of strength.

She let go of his legs and he swung to stand beside her. Giggling, he pulled her into his chest, hugging her tight.

Gobber returned his leg and Hiccup locked it into place.

Next, Stoick came to stand in front of the couple and held out another sword. Hiccup left his wife's embrace and took up the weapon.

This part of the ceremony was crucial. Hiccup was to drive a sword into the one of the main support beams of the hall. If it stuck, their marriage was good. If not, well—Hiccup gripped the weapon close to the guard, and then placed his palm on the pommel. He exhaled with a 'whoosh' and thrust the blade into the wood, sinking it in halfway up the blade.

More cheering.

Finally, Stoick ushered the couple up to the main table. Remember the hammer Hiccup brought with him yesterday? It was still there. And next to it sat two mugs of mead. But not just mead, wedding ale, which was mead with Boar's blood mixed into it. For reasons of fertility and a successful bedding. Hiccup didn't believe drinking blood really help in that aspect, but traditions, what are you going to do?

The couple sat down. Taking up the hammer, Hiccup blessed the ale and then placed the hammer in his bride's lap.

They raised their mugs, then linked their arms and drank. The wooden tankards hit the table with a clang.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife! You may kiss the bride."

Stoick announced.

Sounds of shouting and whistling faded away as the newly weds indulged in their first kiss as a married couple. His hands rested on her waist as her own went up to tangle in his hair.

Hiccup pulled away with a relieved sigh, still staying close to her.

"We're married." She whispered.

He simply beamed and kissed her back.

Now came all the awkward greeting of the guests. Technically speaking, the formalities of the ceremony were over, but to the couple, it sort of went on until—well, tomorrow, when he would give her the morning gift, or the thank-you-for-your-virginity gift. Then there would be more alcohol and more heckling. But for the moment, he just needed to focus saying hello and introducing his bride as Astrid Haddock, not Hofferson.

The 'congratulations' were short, but the 'welcome back's and 'we missed you's went on forever. He wasn't sure, but he promised at least 50 people that he would tell the story of how he left home with nothing but the clothes off his back and came home as the chief of their sworn enemies.

When he put it that way, it sounded like such an epic journey, rather than one of pure dumb luck.

"I can't believe it." A voice started from behind him. Hiccup turned to meet Blackmold, the chief of the Gauls. "I was told that you and the young chief were the same person, but I couldn't believe it. Look at you! All grown up, and filling in your shoes."

"Shoe." Hiccup corrected.

Blackmold laughed. "I see your humor hasn't left you. My, this has been such a lovely ceremony. And such a beautiful bride!" He glanced over to Astrid. "I haven't seen one so beautiful since my own bride." He confessed.

Hiccup put an affectionate arm around her.

"And, if I dare say, you two are a perfect match. I am glad that the arrangement with my daughter didn't go through, I would hate to see you separated."

That lifted a tremendous burden from his shoulders. "Thank you sir."

Blackmold clapped him on the shoulder. "Great! I must go and congratulate your father. He must be proud to the moon and back."

The couple were about to move on, when a short 'ahem' cut through the air. Hiccup turned and almost yelped.

Darla was waiting with her arms crossed. "It seems I have misjudged you." She said flippantly. "Turns out you're not such a wimp after

all. Too bad it didn't work out."

Hiccup was certain that nothing could get him down from the high he was feeling, but he was wrong. His smile faded away as he peered at the troll. "Excuse me? Didn't work out? You ridiculed me. You didn't even give me a chance! I get that you didn't want to marry me, but guess what, I didn't want to marry you either. You didn't need to be such a bitch about it!"

Astrid grabbed his arm when she noticed his visible anger.
"Hiccupâ€¦"

"I wasn't being a bitch, I was telling the truth."

"No you weren't! I'm not useless or pathetic! I never was! You just couldn't see that! You know nothing about me!" He raised his voice.

People began to look on.

"Oh, don't even go there."

"No! You listen to me you troll!" He snapped. "It was because of you that I left. And surely, I will put all blame on you for it. I was enslaved, you worthless ogre! Beaten to a pulp, and yet I rised to the occasion. I did everything I needed to do to survive. I became chief of the Outcasts and I single-handedly ended the war between the Berserkeres, Outcasts, and Berk. Oh, and here's a fun bit of information. I beat Dagur in a fight, with no weapon. No, I'm not bragging." His voice deepened. "I'm just telling the truth."

Astrid shrank back ever so slightly. He frightened her.

Darla was speechless as he put her in her place.

"And before all this even happened, I trained a dragon, thus ending the battle between vikings and dragons forever. So, for you to claim that I'm worthless is very, very far from the truth. In fact, I would go as far as to say that you're the one who is worthless and pathetic, you hateful creature!"

Darla's lip started to quiver as he stuck a finger in her face and spoke with a vehement tongue. "I would rather go through all that torture again, then have to marry you." He shook his head. "Get out of my face, your hideousness burns my eyes and makes me want to vomit."

Darla burst into tears as she fled the room.

Hiccup was pulled back into reality by a gentle tug on his arm. He looked to his wife, "I'm sorry darlingâ€¦was it too much?"

She shook her head. The look of exhaustion and the bags under his eyes did not escape her vision. "That was awesome."

His jovial spirits returned.

When it came time to confront his in-laws, Hiccup was understandably nervous. He had spent all the time up until the wedding hiding, so no one had a chance to speak with him. Astrid pulled him along, eager to

show him that they weren't angry with him.

Mr. Hofferson looked at him with narrowed eyes. Hiccup shrank back.

"You protect her, you understand?"

"Yes sir."

Then he smiled. "Good." Hiccup was grabbed up into a hug, his spine popping. He couldn't help but laugh. Then Mrs. Hofferson embraced him, bawling. "You've grown into such a fine young man! I always wanted a son like you! I'm so happy for you two!" She kissed both of his cheeks, much to his dismay.

It was that day that Hiccup learned; the Hoffersons were huggers.

After everyone was greeted, the couple finally got to eat.

Then it was time for dancing.

Most of the guests were drunk by now, as weddings were the perfect occasion to get wasted. As much as Hiccup dreaded it, he knew he was required to have one dance with his bride, and one with his mother-in-law.

Thankfully, Gobber's band had enough tact to play a soft, slow rendition of the reindeer waltz, with Gobber on the pan flute, and Silent Sven on the fiddle. Even if he only had a right foot, that was the best dancing Hiccup had ever done in his life.

Finally, the time came for Astrid to leave. She would be escorted to their home and dressed for success. She gave him a quick peck on the lips before she was hurried off.

After she left, he rubbed his eyes in an attempt to wane the exhaustion. Stoick appeared and took Astrid's seat. "You alright son?"

"Of course!" He smiled, a bit too fake.

"Tired?"

He nodded. "Exhausted."

"Well, the day is almost over. Tomorrow, the morning gift ceremony really doesn't start until late morning. You'll be able to sleep in."

He sighed in relief. "Good."

"That is, if you sleep."

"Ew, Dad, please. I don't want to hear that from you."

"Don't think we don't know what's happening this evening."

"Oh, I'm well aware you know, but I'd rather not discuss it. Especially with you."

"You know, on your mother and I's wedding night"â€"â€" | "

"Nope, nope. Stop right there."

"I was going to say we just slept." He chuckled. "We were both exhausted from the ceremony, we just cuddled up together and fell asleep. We didn't even talk about before hand, it just was a basic understanding." He smiled at his son. "No one's going to bother you about it. You and your _wife_ have a nice time tonight, whatever that means."

"Thanks dad."

It was then that Tuffnut and Snotlout came up to heckle, looking a wee bit tipsy. "Hey Hic, wheres yer husband?" Snotlout slurred.

"Haha, very funny."

"This joke is gonna go on forever. I'm so excited!"

"The best part is, you'll probably be the cook in the family, unless you want another Yaknog incident."

"Hey, Astrid is a decent cook. As long as she sticks to recipes and doesn't try to invent dishes."

"Yeah, but your cooking is awesome. She'll appoint you chef eventually."

Hiccup rolled his eyes. "So what, am I doing laundry, too?"

"You already take care of the baby."

They were right, he was the woman in the relationship. "Odin's skivviesâ€" He muttered.

"If you've had enough chastisement," Stoick interrupted. "We should go. Can't keep Astrid waiting."

He was lead by torchlight to his cabin, followed by his father, Mr. Hofferson, Gobber, Mwaba, and Spitelout. He opened the door slowly, nervous. No one really told him what all was supposed to happen at this part. He took the stairs to the loft one at a time, his hands shaking noticeably.

Astrid sat delicately on the fur laden bed. Her hair had been released from it's braid and cascaded down her shoulders. Her state of dress was scarce, but not immodest. Nothing to make her feel uncomfortable in front of her father and the chief. Hiccup went and sat next to her on the bed.

"Hiccup," began Stoick, "Do you concede that this young lady is the girl you married today?"

"Yes, this is Astrid." He confirmed.

"And Astrid, do you concede this is the man you married today?"

"Yes, this is Hiccup."

They had to go through this tradition to make sure the couple actually made it to the bedroom together. Couldn't have anything strange happen, like the bridal party picking up a random girl in place of the bride. That would be awkward.

Hiccup gingerly removed the bridal crown, as a symbol of deflowering, and then kissed her.

"Well, goodnight." Said Stoick, ushering the others down the steps. "Toothless is already guarding the door, making sure that you two aren't bothered. See you in the morning."

Hiccup waited until he heard the door close before he let out the breath he had been holding. Astrid placed her flowers on his head and giggled.

"Did you have too much to drink this evening?" He quipped.

"No, just enough." She kissed his cheek.

Hiccup eased her down so she laid against the furs, her hair sprawling out behind her. He put his weight on his hands as he leaned away from her. "Did I tell you how beautiful you are today? Because I must have said it in my mind at least a hundred times."

"You were strangely quiet today. All smilesâ€|" Except for the little exchange with Darla, but she wasn't going to bring it up.

"And why shouldn't I be happy? I married the girl of my dreams."

"Aw, you dream about me?"

"Every night." He leaned forward and pressed feather light kissed across her cheek and down her neck. Her hand moved to the collar of his tunic and her fingers pressed against the muscles of his shoulder. He winced.

"What's wrong?" She put a hand on his chest to evaluate his reaction.

"Nothing, I'm just really sore from yesterday."

"Hiccup," She sat up. "It's been a long few weeks. Noâ€|It's been a long year. This whole year has probably aged both of us considerably. And with the whirlwind events that have taken place, I never got the chance to sayâ€|" She was breathless, but only for a moment, before she cupped his cheek. "Hiccup, I'm sorry."

His eyes widened ever so slightly. "Sorry for what?"

"Sorry for rejecting you. I can't imagine the pain you felt at my words. I didn't mean any of it. I-I was angry and scaredâ€|"

"Astrid, darling, that was months ago! You can't worry about that! I don't hold it against you, so you can't hold it against you." He

tucked her hair behind her ear. "Okay?"

She nodded, smiling again. "Thank you."

He returned the smile and leaned in to take her lips. She allowed for a few moments of heated kissing before she stopped him again.

"Hiccup?" Her voice was much deeper now.

"Hmm?"

"You look exhausted."

He didn't answer.

"I am too. Can we just sleep?"

At that, he all but collapsed on top of her, using her chest as a pillow. "You have no idea how relieved I am to hear that."

"And Hiccup?"

"Yes?"

"We're going to continue this in the morning."

He laughed and scooped her up, rolling so that she could lay against his chest. "Of course."

Hiccup breathed a deep lasting sigh from his chest as he played with her hair.

Finally, no more infernal responsibility.

22. Epilogue

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is with a heavy heart that I announce that this is the final chapter of Infernal Responsibility. This fic started out as originally only seven chapters. But after suggestions and random ideas coming out of nowhere, it evolved into this massive beast of a story. I am so thankful for the followers and friends I have made through this work. It wouldn't be anything with you. Seriously though! It's on the front page! That's amazing! Over 500 reviews! NEVER would I have thought that one of my works would make it! (Except my Cinderella fic, but hey, there's only three pages.)

I want to give a giant thank you to my continued reviewers: Cyclone20, Claxton2, Megabyte22, Porcupain, Johnnylee619, and countless others that have encouraged or yelled at me during the progression of this story. It would be nothing without you.

And of course, I want to extend a special thank you to my good friend Hapciu Ovici whom I have become good friends with. You may not know it, but your continuous hours of support and praise really helped me.

I don't know if it's obvious by the name or not, but I'm an artist in real life. And you can bet your boots that I did illustrations for this! They're not organised, but you can find them at the links on my profile.

Be sure to read the author's note at the end~

* * *

><p>Hiccup heard a soft creak. Over the years, he had developed an acute sense of hearing. It was a curse, since more often than not he woke up over something stupid. Though, crazy as it seemed, he could sleep perfectly through his wife's snoring.<p>

Oh Odin, did she snore!

He would admit it was a bit jarring the first night they had spent together. She laid against his chest, and sometime in the middle of the night, he _felt _her snore. Still, after five years, the sound was a comfort and he missed it when he had to travel for business matters.

Hiccup focused on his surroundings. First of all, Astrid was still asleep, as she was still snoring. Her fingers were threaded through his hair, pressing against his scalp. Her other hand pressed against his chest, right over his heart, as she hugged him around the shoulders. She was pressed up behind his back, her mouth by his neck. One leg draped over his, forbidding movement. It was like this every morning. No matter how they went to sleep the night before, they always woke up like this.

There was another creak. His eyebrows furrowed. The terrors weren't singing, that meant it was still early morning. He could also hear Toothless's soft crooning in sleep. So the creak wasn't from his wife or his best friend, that meant it had to beâ€|

He felt a pudgy finger poke him right between the eyes.
"Daaaddddâ€|." A voice whispered.

Oh no.

A harder poke and a harsher whisper. "DAADD."

"No Pippin, it's too early. Toothless isn't up yet."

"But you promised!"

"I said, 'tomorrow,' not 'at the crack of dawn.'"

"Oh come on!"

"I know you're excited, but if you want my help, then you don't want me to be cranky. Especially when it comes to dragons." Still in his tired state, he was able to come up with a good argument with a six year old.

In rebuttal, Pippin got up close in his face and burped.

Astrid woke up and rolled over. "That's repulsive. Haddock, get control of your child."

Pippin looked at her sheepishly. "Sorry momâ€|"

"Ugh." Hiccup replied. "Look, why don't you go to the docks and see

if the fishermen have anything for Toothless. After I wake up more, then we can go."

"Okay! You're the best, dad!" And with a smack, he kissed his forehead and romped down the steps.

Astrid rolled back into place, hugging her husband. "Still spoiling him, I see."

"He's a little devil. He knows I can't say no."

"Oh come on Hiccup, your son is excited about training a dragon. His _first _dragon! That should make you excited!"

"I'm too tired."

"You're always tired."

"Speaking of that," he turned over to face her and gently tucked her hair out of her face. "Are you still feeling really tired?"

"Yeah, but it's still early."

"You know what I meant."

"I'm fine, Hiccup."

"I still say you should go to the healer."

"Oh, stop worrying you ninny." She hit him softly. "You think I'll go down easily?"

"No, but I still worry."

"I know." She kissed his nose.

"I'd just feel better if I knew what it was, sinceâ€¦"

"Yeah yeah. Hiccup, I can assure you it's nothing fatal. Probably just a bug. I'll be fine while you're gone."

"Yes, but can you handle the twerp?"

She laughed. "That's what 'grandpa' and Mwaba are for."

He groaned as he rolled out of bed and sat on the edge. "I'm sure that Pippin is exactly the reason my dad has all those gray hairs in his beard."

"Or you."

"Could be."

Astrid scooted and wrapped her arms around his waist. "I'm going to miss you."

"It's just two weeks. Toothless will be with me, and I'll think of you all the time."

"I'm not worried. It's just a conference with the Bogs. It's nice

that they want to learn about Dragons."

He sighed, rubbing a hand down his face. "Why do I have to be the leading authority on the subject?"

"Oh, you know you love it."

The front door opened and a young voice called up, "Dad! Uncle Tuffnut said that he was going to bring up some fish for Toothless in a little bit! Can we go now?"

"Fine! I don't see how I'm going to get any more sleep with you making such racket!" He leaned over, gave his wife a peck on the cheek, and then stood. "I'll see you later."

"Remember, patience."

"Seems hypocritical coming from you."

Wham! Her pillow hit him in the face.

"Case in point." He chuckled. "I deserved that." He smirked and threw it back to her. "Get your rest."

Downstairs, Pippin could barely contain his excitement. "Let's go! Let's go!"

"Calm your shorts, Pip. If we're going to be out all day, we need to pack a lunch."

"Okay..." He amended, taking a seat. Toothless sauntered down the steps and lit the fire.

Hiccup took out a satchel and packed some bread and cheese inside, along with two flasks of water, and a medical kit, just in case. He then took a left over fish from a sack and made Pippin hang onto it.

"What's this for?" The boy asked, his tongue sticking out.

"You have to give the dragon a reason to trust you."

He looked at the dead fish with contempt. "Couldn't we use Dragon Nip instead?"

"We want to befriend it, not _sedate_ it."

"What does that mean?"

"Knock him out."

Pippin replied with a silent 'Ahh.'

"Now, I think a Gronkle would be your type of dragon."

"Nuh-uh! Gronkles are wimpy!"

"Uncle Fishlegs rides a Gronkle."

"Yeah, and Meatlug is more like a mother than a dragon."

Hiccup snorted. "Alright."

If you didn't know, you would think that Pippin really was Astrid and Hiccup's, he was so like them. He had Hiccup's green eyes and fiery red hair that would eventually mellow out to an auburn. But he had Astrid's smile. He also had his father's wit and sarcasm, but his mother's determination and stubbornness. Despite this recipe for disaster, the couple raised him well, to be kind and respectful.

He was still a terror after he spent long periods of time with Snotlout or the twins.

Yes, it seemed as though he was just born to the wrong mother, only to find the correct parents right away. He knew Aisling was his birth mother, and he cared about her as she did for him, but he still loved Astrid as his real mom. Besides, Aisling spent plenty of time with her new husband and baby, she wasn't lonely. Hiccup thought the only thing more miraculous than the girl settling down was whom she decided to do so with. It was the day of his own wedding, when he was greeting his guests, that he saw Aisling sitting by herself, sad. He found his dearest cousin and asked him to go over and make idle conversation, but warned of her past. He told Snotlout that she was used to being seen as a tool, so to treat her like a princess.

Apparently it worked, because they were married a year later.

As for the others, Ruff and Tuff moved out of their parents home. Tuffnut still helped his father in the fishing business, his dream job, that is, after being a pirate. Ruffnut ran her home with her brother, cooking and cleaning, being pretty much settled down without marrying. Unfortunately for Fishlegs, she probably never would. The large boy was training in taking up his father's construction business, as well as running a nursery for baby dragons. The team regularly banded together for races and what not, even if they had lives of their own.

"Dad," Pippin finally said, building up courage. "I have a specific dragon in mind."

"Oh, you do?"

"Yes, I saw him in the woods and I think he's perfect."

"Okay, well, what type is he?"

"Can't I keep it a surprise?"

Hiccup looked at him. "I guess so. If it's a new species, you know I'll want to study it a bit before letting you train it."

"Oh, no, it's one in the book."

"Okay." He shrugged, shouldering the bag. "There should be no problem then."

Pippin smiled. "Are we ready? Can we go?"

"Yes! Odin's beard!"

Pippin practically skipped out the doors he was so excited. Hiccup had to chase after him. Toothless looked up after his friend as he was leaving.

"Stay." He smiled. "You get the day off." Then he sighed, "lucky."

Toothless purred, almost mocking the young man. Hiccup rolled his eyes and closed the door behind him.

Almost immediately, Pippin grabbed up Hiccup's hand and practically dragged him to the tree line. As they travelled, they passed the chief's house. Stoick was sitting out on the porch, whittling in hand. Mwaba, likewise, was drinking tea, enjoying the early morning.

"Hi Grandpa! Jambo Mwaba!"

"Good morning, Pip! And where are you two off to so early this morning?"

"No doubt Pippin es draggin' 'es fada wid him ta hunt fa trolls." The giant snickered.

"Dad's going to teach me to train my very first dragon!"

"Oh, ya got one in mind?"

"Yeah, but it's a surprise."

"Oh I see." Stoick smiled, humoring his grandson.

"Where es your husband, Kwikwi? Still sleeping?" Yes, the joke was alive and well, and everyone used it.

Hiccup had took the joking in stride and even teased her about it himself. "Astrid hasn't been feeling well, so yes, she is still asleep."

Stoick was suddenly serious. "Is she okay?"

"She said it was just a bug."

"I will bring 'er sum tea lata." Mwaba amended.

"Mom's fine! She's like a rock! Now let's go!" Pippin piped in, becoming impatient.

"She'll be fine." Stoick smiled. "Looks like you have other things to do."

Hiccup grinned. "See you later, dad."

"Bye Grandpa! Next time you see us, we'll be on a dragon! I'm driving!" And the two headed away.

Stoick watched them go. "They grow up so fast."

In the woods, Pippin still held onto Hiccup's hand, a proud smile on

his face. He loved these outings with his father. The great _Hiccup the Useful_. Really, it was cool to be the son of the chief, but it was awesome being able to learn from the greatest dragon whisperer in the archipelago.

And he could call him 'dad.'

"Soâ€|" Hiccup started. "How are things with Magnus?"

Pippin's smile shrank. "It's Hildegard, dad."

Hiccup snickered. Pippin corrected him every time he did that. Magnus/Hildegard was the Larson's daughter and Pippin's best friend. When it came time for her christening, Gobber stood in for Stoick. Seeing the, concedingly ugly, baby, he named the child Magnus, despite the Larson's wanting to call her Hildegard. So, to everyone in the village, she was Magnus, and only to her family and Pippin was she Hildegard. Pippin did everything to defend her name, but really, the young girl didn't care either way. She was used to it. Hiccup, of everyone, knew the pain of embarrassing names.

"I heard you two were found up on Mildew's hill, picking some of his cabbage?"

Pippin looked at his father, terrified. "It was my idea, dad. He lets it all go bad!"

Hiccup patted his head gently. "I don't care. But Mildew does. That man has hated me since the day I was born, and likes to complain about me at every chance he gets."

"But you didn't do anythingâ€|"

"I'm responsible for you and your actions. I'd hate to see anything happen to you, so justâ€|stay away from Mildew and his rotten cabbage. He's a grump."

Pippin laughed. "Okay, I'll stay away."

"Besides, after today, I'm sure you'll be able to _impress_ Hildegard in different ways."

"DAD!" Pippin blushed. It was not a well kept secret that he had a small crush on the girl. Despite her looks as a babe, she was slowly growing into one of the most beautiful girls on Berk. Hiccup and the Larson's had talked about the two, and the woman suggested to arrange a marriage. Hiccup was hesitant, since his own arranged marriage ended up being a catalyst to tortures he would never put his own child through. In the end, they agreed that they could expect a wedding ten years or so down the road, simply because Peregrin and Hildegard were the only two children in their age group. It was highly likely, but no need for handshakes and contracts. And for Thor's sakes, they were only six.

"Oh come on," Hiccup teased, ruffling his hair. "You look at her the same way I looked at your mom."

Pippin looked up with a pout. "You can't tell anybody, you got that!?"

"I promise." And with that, he grabbed up his hand again.

It was then that they came to a clearing. "That's weird, the last few times I saw him, this is where he was," Pippin announced, breaking the hand clasp.

Hiccup peered around the clearing, looking for any shift in the trees. He assumed his son was talking about a Changewing, but as he looked around, he noticed several sinkholes littering the ground. Walking closer to one of them, he suddenly stopped. It had been quite a few years since he saw one, but this was not a sinkhole.

"Peregrin," he started, his voice dangerously serious. At that, Pippin ran to his side and took his hand. "What kind of dragon is this?"

Pippin looked up with a sheepish smile.

Then came the whispering. It was soft, but menacing, like a message from a thousand lost souls in Niflheim. The ground began to shake, and before it cracked open, Hiccup whispered, "Oh no!"

A demon emerged, screaming in all its frantic fury. The navy blue dragon was 90 percent tail, covered with sharp Nadder-like spines and serrated edges all around it. The tips of the spikes were a blood red, mimicking the color they would be if one got too close. The last ten percent of the dragon was mouth. A perfect 'O' shaped funnel that disappeared into darkness. Six rows of barbed teeth, rotating at a hundred miles an hour in opposite directions, filled the great maw, allowing for the beast to rip through dirt, rocks, and tree roots like they weren't even there. Its stark white eyes landed on the duo. It released a shrieking roar and then dove back into the ground, its massive tail snapping like a whip behind it.

Pippin ran forward and called down the crevasse. "Skewer! Come back!"

Hiccup's voice was unusually high as he gasped out.
"Pippin!"

"Yeah?"

He caught his breath then bit back, "You could have had any dragon in the archipelago. Deadly Nadder, Gronkle, Monstrous Nightmare, Changewing—heck, I would have been fine with a Typhoomerang or even a Thunderdrum! But you want a WHISPERING DEATH!?"

Pippin looked down, his foot scuffing in the dirt.

"And that's an adolescent! They don't have control over their jaw or spines! It's like an out of control _saw blade_! The only thing Whispering Deaths know is killing! It's in the name! It's one of the most ferocious and dangerous dragons, ranked just under a Nightfury! Can you see why this is a bad idea?!"

Pippin looked up at him. "Too hard for you to train?"

That was low. "I have trained at least six Whispering Deaths in the last six years. Not to mention the Screaming Death."

Pippin's eyes widened. "What's a Screaming Death?"

Hiccup rolled his eyes. "_The _Screaming Death. It's five times the size of it's counterparts. It's a rare breed of Whispering Death that's all white with blood red eyes and _eats islands._"

"WHOA! How'd you do it?!"

"A story for another time, Pip." He looked down the hole. A sigh came from his lips followed by a small grin. "Now, we need to figure out a way to lead it out."

"You meanâ€¦you'll let me train it!?"

"Yes. After all, you already named it. Skewer? This'll be one for the bookâ€¦" The rest of his sentence was cut off as a pair of arms wrapped around his neck like a vice. "Oh thank you dad! Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

He hugged him back, "Just promise me you'll be careful."

"I promise." He assured with a nod.

â€œ"

"How are we supposed to find it down here? Isn't this dangerous? I can't see a thing." Pippin whined.

"Patience. And we have to be quiet, if the Dragon know's we're down here, and gets agitated, I guarantee you he will escort us out. This is his territory."

"Then why are we down here instead of up there, waiting?"

"Because sunlight is their weakness. They will avoid it as much as possible. The first time I encountered a Whispering Death, your Uncle Fishlegs and I came down one of it's tunnels, just like this."

"Uncle Fishlegs? Really? I know he likes dragonsâ€¦but this seemsâ€¦"

"Snotlout pushed him in."

"Oh, that makes more sense."

"I will admit, that was not the most relaxing excursion I have been on."

"Excursion?"

"Trip. Adventure."

"Ohh. No, I'm not feeling very calm either."

"Do you want to go back?"

"No way, Eostre! I want a dragon!"

"Okay, then we press on." He hushed him.

"But it's so dark!" He whispered back, harshly.

"Yes, I would have brought a lantern, if I had _known_ we were going after a _Whispering Death_."

"I wanted to keep it a surprise!"

"And boy, was I surprised." Hiccup rolled his eyes. "Let's see. I might have a torch in the satchel." He dug through before he found the dowel and held it out. "Toothless, can you giveâ€"â€"oh Freya." He mumbled. "Hold on, there might be a flint." And he stuck the unlit torch between his teeth.

Suddenly it ignited, startling the two. "Oh, well that'sâ€"â€" He stopped and gasped. One hand held the torch like a weapon while the other wrapped tightly around Pippin.

The Whispering Death was looking right at them.

"Dad, what areâ€"â€" Hiccup cut him off by cupping a hand over his mouth.

"Stay very still." He ordered.

The dragon swayed ever so slightly as it looked at them. There was no sign of aggression.

"Okay, I want you to throw the fish to him, as a gift."

"Fish?"

"Yes, the one you've been carrying for the last three hoursâ€"â€" He looked down to his empty hands. "Where's the fish?"

"Ohâ€"â€"I left it on the surface."

The urge to smack his forehead was strong, but Hiccup was a patient man. "Okay. Well. Great."

"Don't you have some dragon nip? Can't we use that?"

"I do have nip, but Whispering Deaths are not effected by it."

"Oh."

The Whispering Death opened it's mouth ever so slightly. The whispering sound from its teeth became louder.

"Dad? Are we going to die?"

He patted Pippin's head. "No. He's watching us. If he hasn't blasted us out of his tunnel by now, I don't think he will. Just be very careful not to agitate him. I have another idea." Moving slowly, he stuck the torch in a bundle of tree roots so that he could have both hands free.

Pippin clutched the fabric of his father's pants, terrified of the razor sharp fangs that glittered in the dim light.

"Tell me about the first time you saw him."

"Uhâ€¦I saw him in the glen. I was troll hunting, and he popped out of the ground and scared me. I screamed, he screamed, I screamed some more, and he dove back into the ground. I didn't sleep for a week after that."

"And you still wanted to train him?"

"Well, after I thought about itâ€¦he seemed just as scared of me as I was of him. So I came back several times to see him."

"Ah, now I see. He's letting us be here because he recognizes you." He grabbed his son by his waist and lifted him to sit on his arm, he was now closer to the dragon's eyes. "Do you know the first rule of dragon training?"

"Training begins and ends with trust."

"Good. Now, he's showing us that he trusts us by not chasing us out. We must return it."

"How?"

"Hold out your hand, but don't look at him."

Pippin whimpered, looking at the rows of teeth and spines. "Do I have to?"

"Yes, you absolutely do."

Tentatively, Pippin held his hand out and looked to his father. His hand, however, kept flinching back.

"Relax Pippin, you've got to show him you trust him."

"But what ifâ€¦?"

"I've got you, and I'm watching. It'll be okay. _Trust him_."

Pippin bit his lip, but stretched his hand out a little further. Many moments passed before he felt a soft leathery texture on his palm. Carefully, the boy looked up to see the great beast bowing it's head, allowing him to pet it.

"Give him a little scratch."

The boy did so, and a rumble came from the dragon. Finally, Skewer looked up at the boy.

"Introduce yourself." Hiccup prompted.

"Uhâ€¦hello. My name is Pippin Perilous Haddock. Oh, and this is my dad. We're dragon trainers, and we want to be your friends."

The Whispering Death huffed air out his nose onto the hand that rested on his snout.

"Dad, he can't understand me."

"You'd be surprised how much dragons understand." He glanced over to the torch that the dragon had lit for them. He then set Pippin down.

"Are we going to ride him now?"

"Nooo." Hiccup grabbed his shoulder to stop him from trying to go behind the giant mouth. "The bond you've just established is just a temporary agreement. He won't eat us, and we won't hurt him."

"So, what do we do next?"

"Well, we have no gift for him, unless we want to get the fish and then start this all over again."

Pippin sneered at the idea.

"I thought so. Now, Whispering Deaths use their teeth like we use our hands. What they really like, is to have their teeth cleaned."

"Way ahead of you!" Pippin reached into his vest pocket and took out a boot brush. "I read that in the book of dragons."

Hiccup smirked and came down to his son's eye level. "Okay, smartypants. Think you can handle it?" He took a flask of water and wetted the brush just a little bit.

"Maybe." He provided a nervous smile.

"I'll be here the whole time." He assured. "Restate the bond you just made. Hold your hand up."

This time, Pippin was much more confident. Skewer nudged his hand. Encouraged, the boy scrubbed the brush over the very front teeth.

Skewer opened his mouth wider allowing for better access.

"There you go. He likes it!"

About a half an hour later, Pippin was on the last of the teeth, way in the far back of his mouth. Hiccup actually had to hold him around the waist so he could reach.

"There! All done!" Peregrin announced.

The Whispering Death purred in satisfaction, and Pippin scratched him under the chin.

"Do you like the name Skewer? Can I call you that?"

The dragon nudged him in reply.

"Dad! Dad, look! I trained my dragon!"

Hiccup beamed. "Yeah you did! Now, let's see if he'll carry us." He sided up to his son and held his hand out to the dragon. "How about

it? Can you give us a ride home?"

â€

Hiccup had probably ridden almost every type of dragon in his life. Some of them, like Hookfang, trusted him more than they trusted their own riders. He had even ridden a Gronckle upside down and backwards. But there's a first time for everything, and Hiccup was hoping this first time would also be the last. The Whispering Death preferred to travel underground, which was understandable, since it had an aversion to sunlight. But traveling underground was way different from flying. For one, it was pitch black, so they couldn't see where they were going. Rocks and dirt rained down on the riders as the dragon drilled through the ground. Hiccup quickly realized he would have to design a riding shield that his son could hide behind. For now, he would sacrifice himself.

The really strange part was the spiraling motion it made when it burrowed. The tail whipped around, knocking into the sides of the cave. Hiccup had to lay down in order to avoid hitting his head. Pippin was ducked behind the head of the creature, slightly protected at least.

"We're going up!" Pippin declared.

"How can you tell?"

"I have a feeling!"

Couldn't argue with that logic.

Sure enough, only a few seconds later, and the Whispering Death burst from the ground right in the middle of the town. The meager buildings shadowed it from the sunlight, so it didn't return. Instead, however, the village people began screaming in terror.

Luckily, Hiccup hopped from Skewer quickly and restored order. "It's trained! It's trained!" He shouted.

Pippin was laughing horrendously from the dragon's back, hanging onto spikes from it's head. At the sound, the crowd started to simmer down and then dismissed themselves from the situation.

Skewer slithered the rest of the way out of his hole and took refuge in the shade of a porch. Hiccup surveyed the damage with a miffed frown. "I'm going to hear about this."

"Hiccup!"

"Oh, look at that."

Stoick, followed by Astrid and Mwaba came into the square, missing the Whispering Death hiding.

"What on earth is going on!? What's with all the screaming?"

"Ohâ€|it's just a Whispering Death."

Stoick looked grim. "We haven't had one on Berk since the Screaming

Death incident."

"Well, looks like one moved in."

Astrid stepped in. "Where's Pippin?"

"Playing with it."

Everyone stopped. Then the blonde asked in a very dark voice.

"_What?"_

Hiccup waved to his son, and the duo slithered over. Pippin dismounted, but kept a hand on Skewer's side for good measure. Then his father began, "This is Skewer. Pippin's dragon."

Stoick and Mwaba looked impressed, but Astrid was livid. "A Whispering Death!?"

"Yes."

"Do you know how dangerous those things are?!"

"Actually, I do."

"And you let our son train one?!"

"I think we've covered this."

"Butâ€"â€"!"

"Astrid, I was with him the whole time. Skewer's a good dragon. I think, he may be different from the ones we normally see. They have a bond. Don't make him break it."

She looked to the boy to see him giving her puppy-dog eyes. "Ugh! Okay! But if that thing burrows under the house and makes it collapse, you are grounded until it's fixed, do you hear me!?"

â€"

"Are you _sure _you'll be okay while I'm gone?" Hiccup asked as he secured the final pack on Toothless' saddle.

Astrid rolled her eyes for the umpteenth time. "Positive. Besides, you've been gone longer amounts of time."

"But I wasn't leaving a _sick _wife behind."

"Hiccup, I'm telling you, I'm fine! Great actually!"

"You sure?"

"Yes! And if you ask me again, I'll punch you, right in the nose."

"Got it." Then he looked to Pippin who was idly standing by. "And you be good for her, and everyone else, you got it?"

"Yeahâ€"!"

"You have to keep yourself busy training. When I come back, I expect to see some great progress."

"Oh, you will!"

"Glad to hear it." With that, he ruffled his hair and then mounted Toothless. "I'll be back in two weeks."

"See you then." Astrid smirked. She stood on her tiptoes and he leaned down until their lips met.

"Until then, I am, as I was and ever will be, yours."

As Toothless took off into the sky, Astrid could tell that this was going to be a very long two weeks, as she already missed him. She was okay, as she told him, but there was more to it than that. She had wanted to tell him, so badly, but this conference with the Bogs was very important, and she couldn't have him distracted. Idly, she touched her slightly swelled stomach.

It was time for a new responsibility.

* * *

><p>So, you're probably wondering what happens next. Well, I've had many people ask if there's going to be a sequel.<p>

The answer is no.

BUT. It is because I have six or seven different ideas that all want to go up. I already have five chapters written for my next fic, Roses and Lilies, which will be posted next tuesday. Basically, if you follow me, you'll be set on fics for the next year or so.

One more thing before I go. Please, what was your favorite part?

23. Extra

I blame this on Tumblr. May contain HTTYD 2 spoilers. Nothing severe though. I said there would be no sequel, and I hold firm to that.

* * *

><p>Two weeks had passed and Astrid could barely contain the excitement fluttering in her chest. Pippin was oblivious to his mother's joy, mostly because he was off with Skewer at the crack of dawn, only to come home for food and sleep.<p>

It was scary how much he was like his adoptive father.

Mwaba figured it out right away, but said nothing, except to the expectant mother. It was a nudge and 'congratulations.' He often asked her if she was feeling alright, and brought her tea every morning.

Stoick was just as oblivious as Pippin. Of course, he didn't spend much time with the blonde, and not much was noticeable yet. Astrid

wanted to keep it as secret as possible, waiting for her husband to be the first to know.

But he didn't come home. The day passed that he was supposed to arrive. Traveling by boat was one thing, but by dragon? Toothless would have made it in a day.

The next day was the same. No sign of the boy on the horizon, and the blonde became paranoid. She would definitely punch him when he came home.

A week passed. This was serious. The old gang split up and searched the archipelago, but no hide nor scale was seen of the duo. At the Bogs, the tribe said he had left his intended date and said he was going home. No detours. It was agonizing to the young woman.

Then finally, one foggy morning, a dragon's shadow was spotted coming into Berk. A nightfury landed, and it's rider, frantic and excited jumped off his mount.

"It's Hiccup! He's made it!" A voice called in the center of town.

When she heard that, her excitement tripled as she burst from the house. All thoughts of violence fled from her mind as she raced to him.

Hiccup spotted her and smiled, but his eyes still searched the crowd. She embraced him, kissed him, and even teared up a little. "You idiot! Where have you been!? I've been worried sick."

"Yes, I missed you too, milady." He said, absently. "Where's my dad?"

"He'sâ€”Hiccup, we haven't seen each other in three weeksâ€”"

"Oh, I know. Sorry, it's justâ€”" And before he could answer, another dragon landed. An unknown, masked rider stood on the back of the four winged beast. "That." Hiccup finished.

The rider was lowered from the dragons back, by use of a staff, and crept slowly and carefully to Hiccup. Their actions were dragon-like, but timid, as the many gathered vikings startled them. The rider slid up to Hiccup and clutched a strap on his jacket, for reassurance.

"This is Astrid," Hiccup gestured to the woman in front of him. "My beautiful, loving, and _understanding_ wife."

Astrid nodded in awe, her hostility vaporizing.

"DDAAAADDDDD!" A shout was heard before a boy came barreling down the path. He jumped and hugged his father. "I missed you! I've been training! Just like you said! Mom's been helping me, and Uncle Fishlegs and Uncle Snotloutâ€”the twins have mostly been teasing me."

Hiccup laughed. "Good to hear!"

It was then that the boy noticed the feral stranger and became

nervous.

"No, it's okay." Hiccup urged. He looked to the stranger. "This is my son, Pippin."

"Sonâ€"â€|" A broken voice of a woman spoke. Tentatively, she reached out with a shaking hand.

"It's okay, go ahead."

"It's-It's nice to meet you." Pippin practiced his good manners.

"Oh, Hiccup." The woman gasped. "He's beautifulâ€|" Her fingers dove into his red hair and ruffled it.

The boy pouted. "I am not!"

The woman giggled.

"Look who finally decided to show up!" A booming voice called. Stoick strutted into the square, followed by Mwaba, also excited to see his friend.

The feral woman ducked behind the young man, terrified.

"Yep! And I come bearing a present!" He side-stepped to reveal the woman.

"Oh, you've brought another friend home? I suppose you're going to ask if you can keep this one?"

"I have a feeling I don't have to ask." And he walked over to Astrid. "Go on!" He encouraged.

The strange dragon rider raised to her full height and took off her mask.

Stoick's helmet hit the ground with a clatter as the whole crowd gasped in horrified revelation. The chief could only stare, his mouth stumbling and fighting for words.

"Well, go on." Said the brunette. "Shout, yell, berate. I've been preparing for this encounter for the last twenty two years. How could I stay away? How could Iâ€" not come home? I left youâ€" for dragons. I left you to raise our son, alone. And I missed out, and I was wrong. I was wrong about everything. And I'm sorry! Okay? Is that good enough for you? I was foolish and a coward! Andâ€"lords above, won't you say something Stoick!?"

"Daddy? Who is that lady?" Pippin blurted out.

Hiccup grinned at the boy. "That's your grandmother."

Valka turned teary eyes towards her son. "And I've said it a hundred times in the last week, but I'm sorry Hiccup..."

"It's okay, mom." He smiled, tearfully.

While his mother was turned away, she didn't see the hurried steps of

her husband. When Stoick was in arms length, he took her hand and kissed her knuckles. His voice was breathless, like all his energy was spent in those last couple of steps. "You're as beautiful as the day I lost you"

And she crumbled into his arms, basking in the warmth of sweet forgiveness and reunion. She kissed her husband, for the first time in over twenty years.

Pippin tugged on Hiccup's hair. "I want down."

The young man relinquished his hold and immediately the child went to the older couple and hugged the woman around the legs. "You're crying, and I don't like that. I've only just met you, but I love you grandma!"

Stoick barked in jovial laughter as the woman scooped up the boy into her arms. "I'm afraid I love you too, Pippin." She grinned.

Hiccup put his arm around his wife and looked like the proudest man in the world. Valka and Stoick joined them swinging the boy between them. "He's such a handful!" she observed already. "Are you sure you can handle another one?"

Hiccup looked confused, but Astrid covered her mouth to hide the smile.

"What, mom?"

"Does 'e not know?"

Astrid shook her head.

"Know what? What don't I know?" He panicked.

"Well" Astrid grinned. "It looks like you'll have back an old family member, while gaining a new one."

Maybe it was the shock, but he looked to his wife perplexed. "What?"

She patted her stomach.

He fainted.

* * *

><p>(And then no one dies and they all live happily ever after with the dragons, amen.)<p>

24. Authors Note

Hey gang! Just wanted to let everyone know that I entered this story and 'Roses and Lilies' in a contest on Inkitt! If you want to voted for me, please go to: /stories/37985

End
file.